

WINDOWS FACING WEST

BY VIRGINIA MACFADYEN

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1802 Franklin St

apt 102

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TO MY MOTHER
VIRGINIA RINALDI MacFADYEN

WINDOWS FACING WEST

WHY I WRITE

I

My living room faces the west.

From its deep, recessed windows are visible the broad band of the Hudson and a strip of Jersey shore beyond. Here on a window seat cushioned in apple green velvet I spend nearly all of my time. With the hangings pulled tight together hiding the room behind, I can dream for hours gazing out at the river and the line of hills, never quite the same.

The Drive is four stories below. Its noises, when they reach my retreat, come as a sort of muffled chorus to the serene drama of sky and earth. Nor do I see people from my windows except at a great distance which causes them to seem less important than when one meets them face to face. Unless I lean out of my windows and look down (which I never would do), all that I see of the street is a row of tree tops—bare or budding or in full leaf.

So it has been for two years.

Sometimes I read—and I read things which one might not guess—but most often, as I have said, I lie gazing towards the west and wondering about the things which I see until the inevitable interruption comes.

Wong is very silent but I think I should hear him if he were even more silent. It is one of the things he does not understand about me.

Before he has well entered the room, I am out of the

alcove, self-possessed, invulnerable—ready for my luncheon or my tea or my dinner. And more than once I have caught a look of involuntary admiration in his shoe button eyes when I have appeared suddenly. It has become a game between us—his part to enter ever more noiselessly and summon me; mine, to appear without being summoned.

He is clever but I am more clever because my need is greater.

I am sure Wong must wonder what I do behind the apple green curtains.

He would wonder more, if he could see me—supine, relaxed, at peace. But that must never happen. I would rather he saw me in my bath. So I am careful to pull the curtains quite together and then trust to the inexplicable sixth sense which warns me of his approach.

Sometimes my routine suffers a more serious break-into. That is when the man who pays for my apartment comes.

He is not my husband nor my father nor my brother.

Having learned from sad experience that if you refuse to call a spade a spade, others are likely to call it something much worse, I have no hesitation in saying that I am his mistress. I admit the fact as I would admit having red hair. One might as well . . . and, then, why not?

I am fond of him—mildly. If I say that my love is not a wild rapture, I feel sure that I am different from women who are legally married only by virtue of being more honest than most.

He is very rich; he is in love with me; and he is generous. Many people have lived happily together with fewer assets.

But when he comes, I must undergo a metamorphosis. He comes for relaxation, pleasure, gaiety. These it is my part of the compact to supply. As I employ my solitude to discovering my mind, my relation to the detached panorama of the world as seen from my windows, my identity, as it were; so in company I am constantly on guard lest I reveal that I have a mind, even such a groping, bungling machine as I can boast.

Strange, that he who has such small part in my real life should have been the means of providing it. Strange, that "living in sin" I should begin to find my soul in my meditations at the windows when I doubt that as a virtuous stenographer I should ever have found time or inclination to inquire what I am and whither going. . . .

But that is anarchy. |

Living as I do suspended rootless in mid-air, it is inevitable that I should come to lose sight of my own reality. My life has become more and more a remote tower room wherein I sit without those contacts which others have and by which they become real to themselves.

Partly to remedy this lack (which I do not greatly regret, after all), partly, because I have no one to whom I can express my thoughts, I have decided to set down as honestly as one ever can what I am and how I believe it came about.

For it is my conviction that one's vague ideas clarify only upon being crystallized into words.

And, too, it should be entertaining to play this game of truth with myself.

II

Love is of man's life a thing apart,
'Tis woman's whole existence.

IN the main I agree with Byron. But with the provision that circumstances—society—call it what you will, have brought about this state of things, and not that woman is more prone to love by nature than is man.

Woman has been, and is still to a deplorable extent, in the position of a cat or a dog whose chief aim in life is the seeking out of a master. There are good masters and bad masters. The former generously sugar-coat the pill of her servitude, but the fact remains the same.

With the common human unwillingness to face unflattering truths, woman by a series of logical somersaults has arrived at the point where she herself believes that this quest for bread and meat and bed is something mystical, irrational, sublime.

What is more important, she has succeeded in blinding man to the real situation.

I have often speculated upon the nature of woman and the sum of my speculations is that she has sold her spiritual birthright for a mess of quite ordinary pottage.

How much more intriguing the real woman than the pale, milk-and-water myth which she for good reasons has allowed to gain currency!

Even in this confidence game by which she acquires her living, what consummate art, what genius for organization, what Machiavellian purpose she has displayed.

Chastity, duty, the sanctity of the home—these and many of our most impressive ideals are the direct outgrowth of her determination to gain security for life. For she is strong enough to sacrifice the present to future advantage.

She keeps her secret well, but in subtle, almost unconscious ways it is revealed. Who has not heard her lauding her own or some other's husband as a "good provider"; who has not heard some man condemned for "failure to provide"!

And she is unmerciful in her vengeance on those rebels in the ranks who adventurously prefer the pleasure of the moment to their lasting good. Such lack of business acumen, she holds, is dangerous to herself and can be properly punished only by ostracism. That is, unless the rebel has an assured income from other sources and indulges in her adventures from selfish or philanthropical motives. Then it is called eccentricity or something of the sort, and countenanced, if never quite forgiven.

Such being the case, any attempt to portray the inner life of a woman must of necessity deal to greater or less extent with this emotion, so marvelously compounded of various instincts and motives, that we call love.

And as any attempt to write honestly of oneself calls for endless probing of mind and heart, so to understand the results of that probing, one must go back into past experiences for the key. . . . Or so I think, because there are many things in my own life that seem to prove the theory correct. There seems little relation, for example, between the step that led me to my pale green

alcove and a vicious slap which I once administered to my mother when she tried to switch me; and yet, the line of connection is clear. Perhaps it goes beyond the slap to some potential, hereditary slap! . . . Who can say?

How I yearn for more knowledge by which I might understand! But that is crying aloud in a wilderness.

WINDOWS FACING WEST

BOOK ONE

I

FATHER was a small town merchant. He attended church regularly and never gave me any pocket money.

"What you have to have," he would say, "you can get at the store and charge it."

My mother I remember dimly as one might recall a wailing, minor strain in music. She died when I was sixteen.

I should like to go on record as having loved her, but I can not say that such was the case. There was always an instinctive hostility between us.

In many ways she was a good woman, but intensely self-centered. Her principal topics of conversation were my father's infidelity and parsimonious outlook, and my own lack of gratitude to herself.

I have no doubt that time would have mellowed her, nor do I doubt that her complaints were justified, but there is no tolerance in youth and I pursued my own way more ruthlessly after each fresh attack.

Too indolent mentally to make the slight effort necessary to cultivate acquaintances of her own age, she labored for a number of years under the misapprehension that she

could successfully demand my company at any and all times that she desired.

It is a trait that I have observed in many women, especially those who are unhappily married—and very moral.

But I was markedly unsentimental, and her close clingings only served to make me impatient to escape.

Suffice it, that at eleven I made my declaration of independence and for the first time began to enjoy the society of my peers.

II

DURING the eighteen years that I spent in X—— I formed only one friendship that approached intimacy. This was with a girl whom I shall call Marion—Marion Fairley. Our natures supplemented each other nicely. For whereas I was extremely precocious mentally with little sense about the more practical aspects of life, Marion had acquired a vast fund of what might be called expedient information. It is owing to her that I first began to inquire into people's motives which before I had accepted on their own account with a naïve faith in human goodness that now seems incredible.

Marion was a strange mixture of shrewdness, sly malice, tolerance and bigotry. No one could hope to escape the lashings of her nimble tongue . . . and yet, were they lashings? It was as if the doings of other people interested her so greatly that she could never leave off discussing them.

She would come into my bedroom, black eyes flashing, a subdued excitement in her whole bearing, and begin demurely but with eagerness:

"Do you know something . . .", or, "What do you think . . ."

Inveterate gossips usually start with some such formula. Why, I have never discovered.

She was repeatedly irritated with me for my frank display of boredom on occasions when this personal gossip became too long drawn out. I have always been too self-centered to concern myself with the business of other people, unless I care for them, and I must confess that this trait in Marion gave me a tremendous sense of superiority.

Naturally it was she who explained to me the great mystery. And if for some years she bullied me mildly—patronized is the better word—because of my abysmal ignorance, I did not regard it as too high a price to pay.

Head close to mine, voice dropped to a sibilant whisper, she put to flight the horde of vague conjectures flocking my mind by a plain and most detailed account of how babies come to be.

"But that is beautiful," I cried when she had done.

"Beautiful! It's *nasty*," Marion retorted with an air of finality and laughed when I gravely shook my head.

III

IN trying to recall that misty time of childhood it is astonishing to what an extent the so-called significant

happenings are blotted out. What remains is an oddly assorted lot of incidents, often nothing more than extraordinarily vivid pictures.

Thus my sole recollections of an early journey with my mother are summed up in these two impressions:

Myself in a new dress, standing on the platform of the train as we waved goodbye to my father. The dress was blue with tiny gilt buttons (I was inordinately proud of those buttons), arranged in clusters on the blouse. From under the roll brim of a new hat, my hair descended in a silky, burnished cascade to my waist. Carefully I settled it so that two thick swirls fell over my shoulders and formed a frame for my pale little face which no amount of excitement could tinge with color. But my eyes, I saw with some inner vision, were dark as a pool in the woods.

Self-complacent, not a little priggish, I stood there consciously posing and tolerantly surveying my father. I even wondered vaguely how he came to be the father of such fragile loveliness as I knew myself to embody. In a seedy business suit with trousers which obscured his shoe heels, a once-green tie now showing unnatural black discolorations, a shabby hat concealing his "bald spot" and shadowing the furtive little eyes which now held an anxious, strained expression, he presented anything but a romantic figure.

Then a great compassion swept over me and out of the magnanimity induced by my new clothes I blew him a kiss.

He gulped with surprise and awkwardly waved a large, white hand.

I liked to think that his anxious expression was due to concern for our welfare, but even then I knew my father.

He would be fifteen minutes late in opening the store.

.

In a station "rest room" I sat on a hard bench beside a little old lady. The room was deserted but for us. My mother, always subject to train sickness, had become so violently ill that she had been forced to lie down during our half hour's wait in this city whose name I can not recall.

It was the business of the little old lady to keep me from the room beyond where my mother lay. It was my fanatical determination to escape her and flee thither.

The little lady terrified me.

It was hot and she flapped excitedly with a palmleaf fan of gigantic dimensions. I do not remember her face, only this fan and her voice, which responded to my arguments in a disturbed swish like the noise of her fanning.

The air smelled strongly of carbolic disinfectant.

So long as I sat quietly rigid, without protest, the little old lady seemed inert, heedless of my presence. But a move, a word, and she became vitalized. Furiously the palmleaf fan billowed the stale air about my face. "*Swish, swish,*" went the expostulating voice.

Her fanning was a spell from which I could not escape.

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IV

WHEN a man is described as penurious, there is at once called to mind a picture of a penny-counting individual who buys only the cheapest goods and whose family lives in a shabby, ill-furnished house, crying for new paint and new fences.

This is, of course, one type.

My father was more truly penurious.

Such conduct as I have described above would have appeared to him the most wanton extravagance.

Our house, in shape a perfect square with a small porch in front, stood on a corner lot near the center of town. Each of its rooms was an outside room and contained two large windows. Downstairs there were four rooms: parlor, spare bedroom, dining room and kitchen. There was no hall. The entrance door opened into the parlor, behind which was the dining room, reached by sliding doors. Dining room and kitchen were connected by a swinging door. In the right wall of the parlor was a door which led into the spare room.

A stairway in the parlor ended in a narrow hall above with a window at front and back.

Opening on the hall were four rooms, square like those on the first floor, and exactly of a size. My mother's and my father's rooms on opposite sides at the front, my room at the back just across the hall from the combined bath-room and linen closet.

The house was finished throughout in a dust-defying tan calsumine. The woodwork was light, the maple floors were

always scrupulously clean (as was the entire house), and polished to a degree. The parlor floor was covered by a "drugget" or art-square; by the side of each bed a thick grass rug was neatly placed. With these exceptions the floors were bare.

The prevailing atmosphere was that of a hospital minus the whiteness.

My father was impatient of dust-gathering articles, so we possessed few of those knick-knacks that give atmosphere to a home. The furniture, though of good, plain lines and solidly built (he bought for life), was of one finish, a brilliant golden oak,—a light veneer being, in his opinion, less indicative of wear than a dark one.

Our fare was plain but very wholesome (sickness would have been expensive). We rarely had meat except in the winter when vegetables were very scarce—and more rarely still, desserts.

One of my earliest recollections is of asking my father for a penny with which to buy an "all day sucker," as they were called.

"A penny," he exclaimed. "Why, do you know that a penny is all it takes to send one of my bills to people. And for that penny they send me back a great deal of money. Besides, you mustn't eat candy. . . . Mrs. May, you must forbid Gretchen from eating candy. It will ruin her teeth and then there'll be a big dentist's bill to pay."

My mother and me he regarded much as a farmer regards his stock. We were investments and it was up to him to make us pay. He gave us the best of care so that

we might not cause him to pay more for his neglect than it would cost him to keep us in good condition.

Also, he was a leading citizen in the community. It would never do to let it be thought that he could not afford to provide properly for wife and child.

Every item of household affairs came under his supervision. Even the clothes which my mother and I wore were selected by him—and selected with an eye to durability. As I have said, he gave me no pocket money and I am sure my mother was in a similar predicament, so we were helpless to follow our own desires. We must look well, otherwise it might lose him a measure of esteem, but we must look well at a minimum cost.

His own appearance gave him little concern. I can not remember ever having seen him in a new suit. When one of the shoddy, ill-fitting affairs which he habitually wore arrived at such a state of disrepair that he was forced to discard it, it was replaced by another from some mysterious source, but little less disreputable than the former. He never wasted money. When I made my first appearance, his business was already so firmly established that he was known all over the section as a “solid” man. He could afford small eccentricities. Indeed, I have always suspected that his shabby clothes were somewhat consciously assembled with an idea of putting at their ease the large number of his rural customers who might have fought shy of a too-citified merchant. For once good business coincided with his deepest instincts.

Twice a year the clothes question came up. Twice a year my mother, timid but defiant, would present him with

a list which she had gone over and over until it contained nothing but what she regarded as essentials. Twice a year we enjoyed the spectacle of that suave, white hand drawing decisive lines through this item and that item, with a lightning-like rapidity computing costs and reducing costs—commenting thus, in his silky voice—(there is always something of the eunuch in storekeepers):

“Gingham dresses for Gretchen . . . Hm! Percale is just as durable and less expensive.”

Out “gingham,” in “percale”!

I despised him, but could not refrain from a grudging admiration of his undoubted genius for economy.

On one of these occasions there was an item that called for puckered brow and meditative pencil tapping. Mother had inserted in her section of the budget an item: Pink organdie for princess dress.

We who remember the princess dress can visualize yet its lucid gores, seductively following the lines of the figure to the knees . . . the flamboyant whirl in which it terminated.

When he reached this item my father paused in his reading aloud, glanced at mother, sitting there in tight-lipped determination, considered and then spoke:

“Organdie . . . shoddy, unreliable material. . . . If it doesn’t split at the first wearing, it’s flimsy and bodiless after the first washing. . . . Now *Linen* . . .”

“Well, a pink linen might look well,” my mother yielded, grateful for this tolerant acceptance of a frivolous suggestion.

“Linen, yes . . . linen is trustworthy,” my father

continued. "The initial cost is not much greater, and the wearing qualities are trebled. . . . But, pink . . . colored linen is never satisfactory. . . ."

He considered again—came to a decision.

"It's a foolish style, scarcely good for a season. But," he regarded my mother's rather corpulent figure and smiled faintly, "in your case, my dear, the gores would not be so narrow as to prevent their being used after the style has gone out. . . . So a white linen might not be an extravagance. When you have finished wearing the dress," he ended complacently, "you could make table napkins for everyday use out of the sections."

The pencil glided through "pink organdie," substituted "white linen."

On the whole, it is remarkable that my mother lived as long as she did.

Any woman would rather her husband beat her than have him interfere constantly in household matters usually admitted to be sacred to her. The former is less humiliating, less of a nervous strain.

V

I NEVER saw my father display anger but on two occasions.

As a rule he sidled about the house, noiseless, imperturbable, poking his large white nose into every corner—observing everything, jotting frequent memoranda in a battered red leather notebook as he conceived changes

whereby expenses might be still further reduced; or else, working at his interminable budgets, never quite so absorbed that he lost sight of what went on about him.

I knew little or nothing of his life outside. There was a mysterious farm from which our vegetables, eggs, milk, butter and fresh meat were supplied. There was the store to which my mother and I, neatly dressed in our durable clothes, made rare pilgrimages. But the sight of my father, a tallish, loosely built shadow, delving silently and swiftly into the recesses piled deep with enticing fabrics, only served to increase the mystery with which my childish fancy surrounded him.

Several times each year he went on business trips from which he would return more complacent than ever—one could almost see him licking his chops——. After these excursions he showed an inclination to queer outbursts of facetiousness.

Upon his return mother regularly spent two days in bed with a sick headache. She would insist upon having a doctor. It was her most effective way of retaliating.

I entered public school when I was five, although the age set by law was six. However, as my father pointed out, I could read and write, and there was no reason for my staying at home wearing out things when I could be in school. A little judicious pressure applied to the schoolboard (most of the members owed him money) and the matter was arranged to the satisfaction of every one, including myself.

I still recall my absurd delight in the desks and seats which were stained a dark cherry red. I was no less

delighted with the big roomful of boys and girls for being a little afraid of them.

Exhilarating possibilities of companionship opened before me, though it was to be many years before I was permitted to enjoy that companionship outside of school hours.

On the whole, that first year at school made small impression on me.

There was a little girl whom I admired fervently, but from afar. Her hair was curly and flaxen, her clothes a marvel of daintiness and fragility. Even her stout cold-weather dresses and wraps possessed a picturesque quality that was my envy and despair. How I hated my own brown coat of everlasting cloth when Alice appeared in a dark green fairy garment, her flaxen curls snuggled against its big cape-collar edged with fur! We never came to know each other. Why, I can not think because her glance sought mine many times across the big room. Perhaps even then I had some obscure hesitation in putting my dreams to the test. A deity should never be accosted, nor an ideal attained.

The little boy who sat opposite me was very fat with freckles and impish eyes. I distrusted him profoundly. He looked the sort of person who would laugh at one.

Our teacher was busy at the blackboard, the class intent on some seatwork, when he leaned over to me.

"I'll bet you a hundred dollars you won't take off your clothes and go stand up on the platform," he observed in a whisper.

I considered, then shook my head decisively.

"No, I won't," I whispered back.

That evening in talking to mother who always inquired minutely into each day's happenings, I mentioned the incident. Instantly I regretted having done so. Her face flamed and she flew into a passion of rage which seemed groundless to me.

"The common little beast," she repeated over and over, in tones vibrant with resentment.

"But, mother," I tried to soothe her, "I wasn't going to do it."

My efforts at pacifying her had no effect.

Nothing would do but that I must repeat my story to father.

By this time, having obtained such gratifying results, I was feeling very self-important and gave my account with sly gusto. Father questioned me closely, nodded once or twice and abruptly left the house without comment.

The next day the little boy was absent. He continued absent throughout the rest of that year.

It was only during the next year when he again took his place in the first grade that I realized even dimly the methods employed by my father.

The school-house stood at one end of the principal street in X——. It was flanked by extensive playgrounds, one for the boys, one for the girls.

Under a big tree on the girls' side some of the older pupils were teaching me the game of "stick frog" which involves the throwing of a pocket knife from various positions of the hands so that its blade is buried in the earth sufficiently to hold the knife upright.

It was a mild day in early spring and we had all shed our coats. A gentle rain the night before had moistened the turf just enough to render conditions most favorable for the game.

With the open knife held by its point in my left hand, my arms crossed in front, right over left, right hand clutching left ear, I was just preparing for a difficult throw, inelegantly termed "hugging the sow" when I saw an agitated figure descending upon me from the street.

It was the first time I had seen my father at the school.

Breathless with fury, he seized the knife from my limp fingers and jerked me to my feet.

"Don't you know," he panted, "that you will get pneumonia and be sick for weeks with trained nurses and doctors and all sorts of expense if you sit on this wet ground! And, as if that wasn't enough, you must amuse yourself with a butcher knife! Is this what I'm paying taxes to have you taught?"

One dire possibility after another fell from his lips, each more expensive than the previous, while I stood there miserably—too terrified for speech.

At the time, I attributed his discovery of me to my "hard luck." Since then, I have arrived at a different conclusion.

He seemed to possess the self-preservative instinct to an abnormal degree. In the most uncanny way he could scent out active or latent danger to his vital self, his bank account.

The second fit of rage into which I saw him plunged occurred when I was nine.

Our house was never one of those to which people are naturally attracted. It was forbidding in its bare cleanliness. Neighbors, though they respected my mother, could never simulate real friendliness. Her fretful jealous spirit repelled them.

But our relations were invited in regular order to pay us a week's visit, one each year. Most of them patronized me, and those I did not actively dislike, I ignored.

My cousin Lillian, or Lagi, as she preferred to be called, was a revelation to my naïve mind. She was a sophisticated little piece, not pretty but attractive in a sparkling, provocative way, and the vain possessor of many beautiful dresses.

I hated her.

It was not that she had things such as I had always longed for, but that she openly sneered at my wardrobe and referred in no doubtful terms to the superiority of her own.

Matters came to a climax two days before her departure.

We were going to a birthday party that Saturday afternoon. Arrayed in my best dress which in summer was always a white voile, I was standing before the mirror in my bedroom trying my leghorn hat at various angles in an effort to achieve something of Lagi's own distinction, when the door opened and Lagi appeared on her way to the bathroom—she never began dressing until I was quite ready to start, and the long waits this habit of hers necessitated was perhaps not the least part of my grievance against her.

At sight of me Lagi theatrically smothered a snicker.

"My dear Gretchen, where *do* you buy your clothes?"

Hot with resentment, I gave her the superfluous information that my mother made them.

"What are you going to wear," I asked quickly, depositing my leghorn hat on the bureau.

"Oh, just a little old lace dress mother brought me from Fifth Avenue in New York City. . . . That's where all the society women buy their clothes."

In profound silence I automatically brushed my hair.

"Go down and look at it, if you want to," she offered with pharasaical kindness, "it's laid out on the bed."

She surveyed me again, again the wicked, mocking light flashed in her eyes—and she was gone.

To the sound of running water and a too-well remembered snicker, I went downstairs. The door to the spare room drew me irresistibly.

A fluff of white lace and cherry colored ribbon, the "little old" dress greeted me. So beautiful it was that I gasped in sheer hopelessness.

A monumental distaste for my own voile with its substantial cluny trimming came rushing over me anew, as I examined the cunningly fashioned silk flowers, the ribbon bows of Lagi's party dress.

Then something primitive and Hun-like superimposed. This loveliness which I had been worshipping must be blotted out, because it was Lagi's. In a frenzied search my eye fell on her manicure scissors. . . . A dozen scalloped rents and the sacrilege was complete.

In a more peaceful mood, I left the house and traversed

the hot length of the street to Marion's house, where the birthday party was to be.

.

Never before had my physical self suffered violation. At the first sting of the switch in mother's hand, all the furious self-respect in me flared up. I should have killed her, had it been possible. As it was, I enjoyed hugely the impact of my hand on her flabby cheek. Too shocked to continue her assault, she pronounced a religious text—something about young eagles and eyes—and left the room with dignity, no doubt to condole with Lagi.

It must have been twelve o'clock when I was awakened by the cover over me being violently thrown back and a series of blows which I could not at first realize, even, so cruelly violent they were.

The blows ceased, the cover was switched back. Out of the darkness over me came a silky voice that I knew.

"That may teach you not to destroy thirty dollar dresses."

I do not think I cried out. I was too stunned. That night my mind refused to accept the hideous fact.

But in the morning when I awoke, stiff and sore, and perceived that my father's hand descending flail-like on my tender skin had left on my thigh the impression of its long fingers in raised welts that looked like blisters, but were hard; there was born in me the hatred of him which I have never outgrown.

What a mass of unpleasant things I am relating about him. And yet, he had his good qualities, no doubt. It is

only that they were not exercised in the privacy of his home.

He was a regular church-goer—scrupulously honest—and an incredibly hard worker.

And, after all, there are many domestic tyrants who in public are hailed as benevolent—many shrews whom their chance acquaintances call blessed.

VI

It was during my father's absence on one of his business trips that mother exhibited the first symptoms of a disease which finally proved fatal.

For several days she had complained of not feeling well, but I was so accustomed to her complaints that I attached no importance to her present indisposition, especially as she kept at work, steadily refusing to go to bed.

We expected father on Friday. Thursday night I retired early in the hope of being able to finish a book (which I had borrowed from Marion Fairley) before his return.

About nine o'clock I heard mother's somewhat ponderous tread on the stairs and switched off my bedside light. She mounted to the top, breathing heavily and giving vent to frequent, gusty sighs which caused me to shrug my shoulders impatiently. Mother had always enjoyed acting the martyr.

She paused on the landing. I could picture the chagrined look that I knew appeared when she saw my light was off.

"Gretchen," she called cautiously.

I lay quiet, knowing that she would come in for a talk, if she knew I was awake.

She resumed her deliberate progress. The door to her room clicked shut behind her and in a few minutes I heard the muffled noise of a heavy body falling into bed.

A little longer, and I switched on my light again, drew the alluring volume from under the cover and proceeded to lose myself in the amorous adventures of one Hildgarde.

It must have been one o'clock when I was startled from my absorption by an agonized moaning from the next room.

Thoroughly frightened, I ran over the cold floors to mother's room and found her writhing about on the bed in spasms of pain.

"What is the matter," I asked helplessly.

She took no notice of me. The dull moaning continued. Her suffering absorbed her utterly.

"Oh, mother, can't you *tell* me where the pain is," I begged.

She looked at me with remote, glassy eyes.

"Tell me," I insisted, forcing a note of authority into my voice.

"Here, and here, and here . . . and everywhere," she muttered, touching her head and chest and limbs.

The moaning and twisting began again.

I called a doctor, then built a roaring fire in the kitchen stove. As I set the big iron kettle over the flames, it tipped forward and a dash of icy water from the spout

soaked through my nightgown. I realized that I was very cold. My bare feet were purplish and my hands stiff.

"This will never do," I told myself.

To the sound of those unearthly groans I drew on warm clothing.

To whom should I turn! Into my distracted mind leapt the thought of Rose O'Malley, a careless, good-natured Irish girl who came in to do the work when mother succumbed to her headaches.

"I'm going for Rose, mother."

No pause in the distressing cries.

I met Doctor Royce on the porch.

No, there was nothing I could do at present.

Down the steps and out the gate I flew, disregarding his remonstrances. I must have some one with me in that terrible house.

Rose lived only three blocks away, but it seemed as if I should never get there, whipped on as I was by the sound of mother's groans in my ears.

It was late in January. For days it had been cloudy. Now a fine driving rain had set in which froze as it fell.

Afterwards in thinking of that night I always see myself, a veritable Banshee, speeding bareheaded through the icy mist, with long hair streaming out behind me, stumbling, sobbing dryly when I lost my balance and fell, but always going on.

Certainly Rose was startled when she opened the door on my white face, wild eyes and red hair festooned with frozen rain drops.

She drew me impulsively into her little parlor with its

impressive decorations: a framed Bible text bordered with shamrocks over which a crucifix hung, the pictures of her six husky brothers, and the bunch of wax flowers in a glass case.

Her capable optimism reassured me. No very dire calamity could befall us with Rose in charge.

Even so, there was a long night and day of unrelaxing vigilance before the doctor pronounced mother out of danger.

The coma and convulsions had been accompanied by inflammation in the chest which, but for Rose's skilled nursing, would have developed into pneumonia.

When father arrived late Friday night the crisis was past, but I think I have never seen a more frightened man than he appeared when he learned of mother's attack.

She lay inert, her face (which in defiance of the body's flabby corpulence had remained thin, with skin tight stretched over brow and high cheekbones) showed a dingy brown against the pillows. After visiting her, father buttonholed Dr. Royce in the parlor and urged him to spare no pains nor expense in getting her well as quickly as possible. Dr. Royce assured him that all immediate danger was past, if his directions were observed, but that the disease might continue in chronic form, in which case, he was helpless to effect a cure.

Father was exceedingly perturbed. Mother was an excellent housekeeper—had he not trained her?—and his mind was already busy with the problem of obtaining some one at little cost to take her place, should the worst occur.

He again urged the doctor to spare no expense in getting her well.

He repeated this injunction to Rose on Sunday morning when she and I were preparing dinner.

"I am very much concerned, Rose, about Mrs. May," he ended, sidling out of the kitchen on his way to church.

Rose winked openly at me as she recklessly cut off half a print of butter and plopped it into the pudding sauce.

Then she amused me hugely by singing in a sly undertone a song she had learned in some of her travels:

You hypocrite, you Beelzebub,
You dwell among the swine.
You go to God with a flattering tongue
And leave your heart behind!

VII

SUNDAYS at home were always insufferably tedious.

At best there was little amusement to be had in X——, and on the seventh day there was a rigid ban on that little. So long as one observed the forms of righteousness, any amount of secret vice was winked at.

Intolerant as was the town, my mother was even more so. Sunday was a day of forced inaction. Dinner was cooked with breakfast and left in the warmer until one o'clock. Supper was a cold pick-up. Music was forbidden—except sacred music, which meant dolorous Methodist hymn tunes—reading must be confined to the Bible and the various church papers.

This was God's day—how I came to loathe the sound of

those words!—and my mother as God's viceroy intended that it should be properly observed.

Though she did not attend church regularly, she took care that I should do so, and, until I openly rebelled, the day was rendered still more offensive by a long sermon, morning and evening, through which I sat in an inattentive, uncomfortable stupor on the hard pew.

Most of the young people consoled themselves for the day's inadequacies by long walks in the afternoon, but mother looked askance at even this innocent diversion.

Father had no such convictions. He never objected to my doing what the best people did, so long as it cost him nothing. He went to church because it was good business and insisted that I should put in an appearance there at not too great intervals for the same reason. Beyond this, his concern for my spiritual welfare did not extend. He might have forbidden the walks on account of the damage to my shoes, but this, he reluctantly admitted, was neutralized by their beneficial effects.

Mother was more altruistic. She had called an immortal soul into being and it was her duty to see that soul duly imbued with the right aspirations—her aspirations.

In spirit a true Puritan, she regarded the world as a snare and a delusion and endeavored by precept and example to set my thoughts on higher things—the life hereafter. One of the ways by which she strove to attain her purpose was a daily hour of Bible reading. This was a mistake. Catholics, I have heard, are forbidden to read parts of the Bible. In this the church does well, for no

one can be thoroughly familiar with this best of books and retain an unshaken faith in its divine inspiration.

No one? Yes, many. My mother (and her kind are legion) possessed a faith which cloaked the most glaring inconsistencies with meaning—none the less there because her eyes were blinded by sin to its existence. This unquestioning acceptance she tried to instil into me.

She was not successful.

I was never sufficiently practical to be a good Christian.

And, this insistence on a profession of belief in the entire Bible is to me as absurd as insisting that one subscribe to all the ideas contained in the collected works of, say, the Elizabethans.

I have read The Psalms, Ecclesiasts, and The Song of Solomon with real delight, and I have always felt a whimsical tenderness for funny old Job—but how any self-respecting woman can endorse St. Paul, Genesis and Leviticus is beyond my comprehension.

Mother had good reason to regard the world as a snare. Even I had been pretty badly snared at the outset by the circumstance of my birth into this incredible family. But that I regarded as a temporary misfortune which I should in time outlive. Otherwise, the world enchanted me. And, leery of a future life, I could never rid myself of an irreverent conviction that, in her bargain with the Supreme Being, mother had been pretty badly sold, as the English say.

It was the fact of her too great intolerance which brought about a revulsion in me to all the creeds and dogmas which we sum up in the word Christian . . .

which set me to seeking my own way, and my own good—a way and a good quite dissimilar to hers—so, on the whole, I am grateful.

Marion Fairley first planted the seeds of rebellion in my mind. Previously I had refrained from the walks, submitting to a torporous afternoon in the face of threats of eternal damnation and the certainty of a scene.

“Oh, please come, Gretchen! We’re going to the Falls and it’s so pretty outdoors,” she begged one afternoon.

“Mother won’t let me,” I replied doubtfully.

“How silly,” she cried, “why, what can she do?”

What could she do, come to think of it? True, she could *say*, but I was hardened to that. Here was I, a great girl nearly twelve years old, and mother treated me like a baby.

On the porch father dozed in a chair, handkerchief covering his face from the glare and the flies. Mother, I knew, was having her afternoon nap surrounded by religious literature.

My own room was hot and bright with June sunshine. (There were no trees on our place. Father said they caused houses to rot.) Why should I spend four uncongenial hours cooped up here when freedom and delight depended only on a little resolution!

“I’ll be over in a few minutes,” I told Marion suddenly.

“Mother,” I called softly, opening her door.

She started and quickly opened her eyes.

“Mother,” I began, using an unaccustomed formula,

“I’m going to walk with Marion and some of the girls.”

She looked at me in astonishment.

"Do you know whose day this is," she asked rhetorically.

I omitted the obvious answer.

"It's not your day," she continued in a sepulchral tone, "it's God's day, and you have no right to use it for your pleasure."

"I'll be back about five," I remarked, ignoring her exhortation.

"Gretchen! Do you know the commandments— Have you forgotten your God?" she cried dramatically, now thoroughly roused.

Even the meekest worm will turn disrespectful, given sufficient prodding.

"No," I answered hotly, "but I'm forgetting yours just as fast as I can!"

The slam of the door cut into her weeping as I ran to join Marion.

I was cruel. So is all youth, with the cruelty of life itself. How else can it exist in a society where parents assert rights of ownership over both bodies and minds of their children?

VIII

THAT afternoon marked the end of mother's authority over me. True, she continued her protests, but in a half-hearted way as if she knew they would be disregarded. Her complaints lost their edge of bitterness which made them seem even less justified than before. It was as if she had

ceased to care and only continued bemoaning her fate from a sense of habit.

More and more she was inclined to drowsiness—seldom leaving the house except to potter about in the few rows of hardy annuals at the edge of the back yard. Her face with its brownish skin and deep sunk, pocketed eyes, never failed to stab me when I chanced on her among the flowers.

Death tending life!

From long custom she kept the house spotless, of which she was secretly proud. And she was proud of my looks and of my progress in school, though she would have gone to the stake rather than admit it.

As she lost ground, my father seemed to gain ground. His business trips became more frequent. The store was expanding. Soon he would need an assistant. It was his plan to have me learn typewriting and book-keeping and come in as cashier, clerk and general office help when I had finished school. In this I unwillingly concurred. No other course seemed possible. I was too young to leave home; even if mother could have managed without my help, and father would not hear of college.

How little members of a family know one another! Here were we three housed together, no one of whom was in sympathy with any other. Mother, intent on her salvation; father, on his advancement; myself, a blend of unreliable chemicals which any chance touch might explode.

Father came into my room early one morning, his pallor tinged with grey, and sat down abruptly.

"Gretchen, your mother is dead," he burst out.

I gazed at him incredulously. His long hands were shaking queerly, and there was terror in the glance he gave me.

"Dead, I tell you," he cried again, his voice breaking excitedly, "Oh, God!"

"Oh, God," I echoed numbly, the ghastly fact unrealized. "Oh, God!"

"Phone for Rose," he ordered impatiently, "I don't know when it happened. She'll have to be got ready—it's awful—awful!"

That defeated clay had now more power than it had ever possessed in life. A presence, awful, portentous, hovered behind the closed door at which I stood trembling.

An almost tangible stillness in the room—on the bed, a body, unbeautiful, puffy with marks of the disease, but clothed in dignity—terribly remote.

That breast had nursed me, those hands tended me, sewed for me, ironed for me, cooked for me—Yet what had I now to do with *this*! With primitive repulsion I gazed on death. . . . Shameful fact, more shameful than illness!

Rose found me there.

"Poor, motherless darlin'," she crooned, sweeping me into her great arms.

"Oh, Rose, there'll have to be a funeral, won't there," I sobbed, "and black dresses and awful music. . . . I can't stand it, Rose, I *can't*!"

BOOK TWO

I

MY sixteenth birthday found me duly installed in the store as father's assistant—found me enjoying the first real freedom I had ever known.

To begin with, father had wanted me to work for board and clothes, but I was not so easily trapped. Already I had learned the potency of money. Money, however little, I must have for my services.

He persuaded, argued, threatened. But I was adamant. Finally he gave in, and, I must say, he gave in with very good grace. Ten dollars a week was the sum fixed upon. For this I was to work from nine in the morning until seven at night—on Saturdays, until ten-thirty.

But he employed a characteristic subterfuge for all that.

"You can hardly expect me to pay you a great sum of money like this and hire a housekeeper too," he reasoned. "I'll open up at quarter of eight as usual, and you needn't come until nine. That'll give you time to wash the dishes and clean the house before you leave. Then at noon you can run home for a cold snack and set out something for me. You ought to be back by one—I'll stay until then so I won't have to shut up the store and lose a lot of trade. . . . That darned Jew across the street don't even stop

to sleep. . . . Rose will come in and get supper for a couple of dollars a week."

It was not an easy program. But all my life I had been accustomed to early rising and little time to myself, so it did not seem impossible. Indeed, the prospect of owning ten dollars each week would have taken the sting from a much more irksome routine.

So it was agreed.

Each morning I awoke at six-thirty to the vibrant blare of an alarm clock, jumped out of bed and dressed, summer and winter, in a fireless room, hurried downstairs to find the kitchen stove hot (my father made the fire before he dressed) and began breakfast. By seven he had come sidling in and sat down without comment to eggs and sausages or fried potatoes and codfish balls. By half-past seven he had finished breakfast and newspaper and was gone.

Then followed a wild scramble of dishwashing and bed-making and floor-mopping, always with an eye on the clock, for I was "docked" if more than five minutes late at the store. By twenty minutes to nine the house was shining with cleanliness and order, a cold lunch covered on the kitchen table, and I buttoning myself into a fresh blouse.

I was never even five minutes late.

I shall always look back upon those two years with pardonable pride. What an efficient person I had become, overnight, almost! But the glory of ten dollars a week was largely responsible. Surely, if the love of money is the root of all evil, it is also the root of many virtues.

Every Monday on my way home to lunch I stopped by the bank and deposited five dollars. The other five went for clothes, "treats," and candy—quantities of candy, candy of all kinds from licorice and gumdrops to the weekly quarter-pound box of chocolates which was my Sunday's dissipation. The craving of sixteen years cried for satisfaction, and I indulged it shamelessly. But I was careful to brush my teeth scrupulously after a debauch, and I examined them constantly with the aid of two small mirrors . . . none of my precious savings should enrich the dentist, if I could help it. Gradually, as I could perceive no flaws in their milky surface, a bitterness entered my soul.

Candy did not decay the teeth. It was a cry of wolf which my father had used all those years to save an occasional nickel.

If he suspected my vice, he gave no signs of it. His manner toward me had undergone a subtle change. An ingratiating undertone was now apparent.

I had become a distinct business asset. I drew trade.

The country people who crowded the store on Saturdays and holidays would gaze in openmouthed wonder at my hair and slender hands. The women asked my advice about their clothes, and household problems.

Nor was it only the country people who liked to have me wait on them. The store began to attract an element of trade which formerly had bought everything in New York or Albany. Women would come in and, if I was busy, wait until I had finished, to match samples or find

patterns, or get my advice about what colors they should wear.

I was conscious of my attraction (what person is not?) and only unpleasantly so when the salesmen came. After a time they grew to wait until father's lunch hour to visit us, and then I was forced to endure their presence until he returned. They made confident advances, offered me absurd reductions in ready-to-wear garments, strove by admirable persistency to reach some sort of assured footing with me.

But I was quite unawakened. The only emotion they inspired in me was a tolerant distrust. Their sophisticated posings instinctively repelled me. They didn't ring quite true.

Still, they, too, increased my consciousness of being an asset, and it was after one of my most determined admirers had made father an unusually low rate on an order of shoes that I determined to ask for a raise.

I approached him at the end of a particularly successful day.

"Father," I began with inward quaking, "I've been working for you a year now, and I think I ought to have more money."

He seldom showed surprise except in an excess of deliberation. Now he put down his paper precisely and tapped absently on the arm of his chair while he surveyed me.

Finally he laughed tolerantly.

"Getting ideas, aren't you, my dear?"

"Yes," I replied.

"Well," he went on, "you must remember that I ran the

store for a good many years without you—and I can do it again, if necessary.”

But I was ready for him.

“Then, I’ll go over to Mr. Berman’s and ask him for a job. He’ll be glad to give me fifteen dollars.”

He tapped in silence for a few minutes.

“You’ve done well,” he spoke at last, “but, if I give you a raise, you aren’t to get any ideas that you’re indispensable. I’ll give you fourteen a week.”

“Thank you, father,” I murmured, turning to go.

“Wait a minute,” he called after me. “This extra expense is considerable. We’ll have to cut down. I think you can manage cooking supper except on Saturdays. We’ll let Rose come in then.”

II

FROM the first the rigidity of my routine had left me little time for social life except a few hours in the evening which I was usually only too glad to spend quietly—reading, sewing or just resting.

Now that cooking dinner had been added to the list of my duties, I seldom finished work for the day before nine o’clock. Aching with fatigue, I would undress, get into bed and open a book. But sleep generally overtook me before I had read twenty pages. Many times I have wakened at six-thirty to find the light still burning, the book beside my pillow where it had fallen from my sleepy hands.

Even the shrewdest man can over-reach himself. Father,

in dispensing with Rose's services had deprived me of a safety valve. I had always lived vicariously in books—no matter how prosaic my own existence, it was rendered endurable by the solace of losing myself at night in the more glorious lives of others.

Now that was gone.

I became restless, questioning.

"Is *this* life," I would ask myself, "this getting up at dawn, a day of drudgery, a night of animal-like sleep in order that I shall be able to get up at dawn and go through the same program again . . . and again?"

I took to poring over my bank book.

During my first year in the store I had saved two hundred and sixty dollars. Since my "raise," I had always put ten, and sometimes fourteen dollars in the bank every week. Beyond an occasional new dress, my expenditures were small, and it was the joy of seeing my hoard increase that kept me from utter despair.

I can not think why I did not indulge my passion for pretty clothes and footwear. The piles of rich fabrics in the store often wrung from me a longing that was almost physical in its violence, but I never permitted myself to draw on my savings.

Perhaps the thought of escape was always present in the back of my mind, all the more powerful for being unconscious.

However that be, I cooked and cleaned and clerked none the less efficiently because I went through the days like a somnambulist.

There were periods of intense self-consciousness.

Standing before the mirror at night brushing my long, heavy hair, I would catch my reflection and start with surprise, as if seeing myself for the first time. A Narcissa, gazing wide-eyed on her own loveliness. . . . With cool fingers I would follow the pale oval of my face down to the throat, trace my body's lines as far as the narrow hips—wonder at the texture of my skin and the mass of flaming color that was my hair.

Surely I, who have worshipped beauty so long, may say with all reverence that I was beautiful—am still beautiful, though some of that early radiance has departed.

I hoarded my beauty as I hoarded my money—against some future need. I was never too tired at night to brush my hair the prescribed hundred strokes, nor to rub into my skin the cream which kept it satiny smooth. Not once in my morning rush did I neglect to draw on gloves—rubber ones for dishwashing, an old pair of woolen mittens for sweeping and mopping.

Marion used to laugh at my precautions.

“You’re sure to be an old maid—you’re so fussy,” she once told me.

I looked at the skin of her face which showed tiny, rough patches under the powder, at her hair, broken and lifeless from habitual “tangling,” and neglected to make the reply which was certain to anger her.

Marion was careless of details. So long as she presented a satisfactory ensemble, she thought nothing of the impression produced by minor insufficiencies. While I have always held that, if each part be perfect, the whole **can** not be less.

We were intensely critical of each other, as most girls are; yet coloring her attitude was a half-scornful, half-envious admiration; permeating mine, an affectionate gratitude for her friendship which held us together in the face of surface incompatibilities.

"What do you think," she cried one evening, entering my room and closing the door carefully behind her. "The old Frazer place is being opened!"

"Well," I queried, "what if it is?"

"Mrs. Frazer is coming to spend the summer," she went on, undaunted by my lack of enthusiastic response, "but that isn't half," she paused dramatically, "Jake Frazer's coming too!"

"Jake Frazer . . . ?"

"Oh, don't you *remember* him," Marion burst out irritated at my denseness. "He lived here until Mr. Frazer died and his mother moved away. His father left a lot of money and last year Jake came of age, so now it's all his. They say he's gorgeous, my dear, simply gorgeous—a Junior at Cornell and all that, but wild as they make them. Drinks and all that!"

I had never seen Marion so excited.

"Never heard of him," I replied laconically.

"Oh, you have, too," she insisted. "Why, he started to school the same year we did and then dropped out a year, I don't know why."

Suddenly out of the dark corners of memory there leapt the face of a little boy—a fat face with impish, mocking eyes. He had sat opposite me in the first grade . . . he had said something to me . . . there had been an

awful row at home. . . . What *was* it he had said to me?

Marion's eyes were fixed greedily on my face.

"You do remember," she cried.

"Yes, I remember now," I said slowly. "I don't think I shall like him."

III

IN May I conceived the idea of bringing my lunch to the store. This gave me a precious hour and a half for reading. For father, who had been complaining of the haste with which he had to eat at noon, seized this opportunity to leave at twelve, instead of one, as was his custom, and remained away until half-past one.

Indigestion was his bugbear and while the new arrangement did not serve to make him eat more slowly (that could not have been accomplished) it gave him time for a quiet half hour in which to "digest," as he put it.

For once, his interests coincided with my own.

I was famished for books as I had never been for food.

I had long ago exhausted the "popular novels" of the town library. Now in my greed I turned to dusty, undisturbed shelves in search of new pastures.

The instinct for good literature must have been present in me always, for I found myself captured almost instantly by the contents of those neglected volumes which I exhumed.

Tom Jones . . . Don Quixote . . . Maupassant's stories, in what I now realize was a very bad translation

. . . The Black Tulip . . . The Lady of the Camelias . . . Truth . . . Pride and Prejudice and Sense and Sensibility (which I enjoyed in spite of their appalling titles) . . . Jane Eyre . . . The Arabian Nights . . . Tess . . . Jude . . . The Return of the Native . . . Grimm's Fairy Tales . . . Emerson's Essays. . . . These serve to show the variety of my reading. I devoured books with an almost incredible rapidity. Three to four hours generally sufficed for a novel.

Dickens, whom I read at the age of twelve was the only Standard Author with whose work I had been familiar. Father had obtained a set bound in red near-Morocco from a customer who could not pay his bill. These volumes with The Encyclopedia of Useful Knowledge stood solitarily behind the shining glass doors of a section bookcase—our library.

During my age of innocence while I still cherished a few stray illusions, I would ask father for money to buy some longed-for book. His refusal was invariably tinged with surprise.

"Why, what more books do you want? Anything you have to know you can look up in the Encyclopedia there. There are over five million facts in those books," he always ended, "you'd do well to study them."

Of course, there had been four years of casual Shakespeare in High School. But this had only moved me to an attitude of profound aversion from the celebrated dramatist.

French novels which are now my especial delight, affected me then much as raw meat. My cast of mind was

uncompromisingly romantic. I leaned toward the fantastic, the improbable.

Yet, strangely enough, I was profoundly attracted by Hardy.

The explanation is probably that I was attracted to the personality of the man as I imagined him—a fiery, dark, Cyclopean soul, attuned to loneliness, conversant with despair, seeing man helpless in the grip of circumstance, yet hopeful of man. The sublime courage of him who could believe *The Dynasts* and live! Tragedy is always romantic.

Perhaps of all my reading during that summer it was Hardy and Emerson who exerted the greatest influence. Not that I accepted either completely, but that they started trains of thought in my mind which have helped to shape my destiny.

.

Rain obscures the lacy pattern of branches opposite my window, shuts me tight in a green core at the center of the grey-swathed world.

On such a day my reading at the store could be indulged without fear of interruption.

Propped back in a straight chair behind the thread cases, with my feet on a small wooden box, I would munch tasteless sandwiches and apples, my eyes never straying from the volume on my lap. At twenty-five minutes past one, I'd snap the book shut, brush the crumbs from my dress and, kicking the box under a counter, make my way to the back of the store where I washed my hands scrupu-

lously so that no trace of food could remain to injure the fabrics that I measured. When father returned I would be sitting with an expectant eye on the door, or waiting on some customer who had just entered.

On such a day as this, I finished Tess. I wept aloud, concealed behind the thread:

"It's too sad, too cruel," I cried.

"Oh, lady! Please don't cry so hard," begged a humorous voice above me.

I choked my sobs and looked up in an agony of shame.

The blond head of a man was thrust comically over the thread cases, his blue eyes regarding me worriedly, intently.

As he caught sight of my face, the concern changed to delight.

"Why, hello, Gretchen! I'm Jake Frazer—you probably don't remember me, though."

"Oh, yes," I denied composedly, without cordiality.

"But, I say, you were crying. Can I help you?" he offered.

He still looked the sort of person who would laugh at one, I decided, though in no other respect did he resemble the fat, freckly little boy I remembered.

"No, thank you," I replied guardedly. "Is there something for you to-day?"

He looked baffled, as if this reserve was something to which he was unaccustomed.

"I wanted some walking boots," he admitted slowly, "but . . ."

"Father is at lunch," I told him primly, "but I can

show you what we have . . . he'll be back in a few minutes."

It was a quarter past one.

Jake professed himself delighted with our selection of high boots.

During their examination he kept up a rapid fire of talk to which I replied in polite monosyllables.

I recognized a fundamental difference, and yet, his manner was reminiscent of the traveling salesmen's. There was an assurance, an undercurrent of banter which disconcerted me, accustomed as I was to the literalness of my fellow-townsmen.

Marion's indictment of him as wild seemed probable.

Quite definitely, I felt that I disliked him.

That his puzzled glance strayed occasionally to my reddened eyes did not help to diminish my chagrin and embarrassment.

When father entered, I turned over my customer to him and retired abruptly to the opposite side of the store.

"Idiot," I groaned in a savage undertone.

"Idiot! As if it wasn't enough to bellow like a calf, I have to make a worse fool of myself by calling out all sorts of silly things!"

I pushed Tess into the ignominious obscurity of a drawer of remnants.

"Come in again, sir," I heard father's silky voice saying at the door.

"You can just bet I will," the other replied in accents odiously hearty.

His glance sought mine over father's head. Jake was very tall.

"I'll be needing all sorts of things," he said looking straight at me.

I stared back coldly.

"Glad to see you at any time," father assured him suavely.

But I told myself he would not find *me* so suave!

IV

AFTER this, hardly a day passed that Jake did not enter the store on some pretext or other. Moreover, he came at the noon hour when father was away and there were few or no customers.

This annoyed me, as it meant that my reading suffered. For once inside the door Jake was immovable as Gibraltar until twenty-five minutes past one.

"You mustn't come here any more at this time," I told him finally in despair. "If you really want to buy things, can't you wait until father is here?"

"If I really want to buy things," he echoed reproachfully. "Have I ever entered this mart of trade without departing heavily laden?"

It was true. But I did not remind him that even my unsophistication could detect his abysmal indifference to the purchases he made.

I never failed to greet him with the stereotyped:

"Something for you to-day?"

This was meant to indicate that I regarded his visits merely as business occurrences.

Sometimes his reply to this question was amusingly vague. So much so that on one occasion after he had been coming for two or three weeks, I suggested with satirical intent that we had just received a remarkably attractive lot of gingham aprons in which he might be interested.

Jake beamed delightedly.

"Just what I'm here for! You witch, how did you guess? Phronsie told me this morning that if I failed to bring home some aprons for her I need never hope for another pie. Give me four—large ones—Phronsie's fat. Funny how most good cooks *are* fat!"

In a disapproving silence I wrapped up four—large ones, and handing them over the counter, received his assurance that there was "nothing else."

With that I turned away.

My pointed rudeness only seemed to increase Jake's persistence.

"Aren't you going to talk to me?" he cried in consternation.

"I haven't time—I'm reading."

"Oh, Guinevere," (he had dubbed me thus at our third meeting) "you, in a stuffy store, wrapped up in a stuffy book! It's—unnatural!"

"If you find the store stuffy," I began.

"Not at all—on the contrary," he hastened to add. "My remark was wholly—er—allegorical. But aren't you afraid of ruining your eyes . . . ?"

"My eyes are very strong."

A wicked twinkle appeared in his. "But hadn't you been reading that first day I came," he asked innocently. I chose to ignore the implication and remained silent.

"Do you like books so much, Guinevere?" he persisted. I nodded.

"Will you let me send you some poetry—you like poetry, don't you now?"

"I don't know," I replied slowly, my interest at last aroused. "I've never read any."

He was honestly astounded.

"Never read any poetry," he cried. "Why, lambkin, we must remedy that without a moment's delay. I'll send you some luscious volumes. . . . Though I suppose I'll only be cutting my throat, as you'll *never* talk to me then."

I thought of the salesmen who had urged me to accept gifts from them.

"I can't let you give me books," I refused icily.

"But why, that's silly," he disposed of my objection. "Won't you even let me lend you some," he went on as I made no answer.

My independence and distrust struggled with my eagerness.

"If you want to, you may lend me some books," I conceded grudgingly at last.

"That's almost as good," he admitted, disappointed.

"And you won't come in again when father is away, will you?" I pleaded.

"But I never get a word with you when the old fruit is here," he complained.

"Do you want people talking about me?" I demanded. "Mr. Berman always comes out of his store when you stop here—and he grins at me in the most awful way when I meet him on the street."

Jake flew into a rage that I later learned was characteristic. For like most men of a certain kind of impulsive generosity he became blindly furious when his motives were impugned, when an outside influence seemed likely to interfere with the attaining of his desires.

The veins in his neck swelled alarmingly. The child-like fairness of his skin was suffused with dark red.

"The filthy brute," he cried in a choked, incoherent voice. "If he dares to insinuate things about you, if he so much as dares to look at you, I'll kill him like I would a snake!"

"I've no doubt you could demolish poor Mr. Berman with one tap of your knuckles," I replied coldly, "but that would not cause the gossip to stop."

He glared at me for a moment.

"All right—then I'll stay away."

He left without another word, and in such haste that the aprons were forgotten.

Nor did he appear next day, but when I went home to dinner I found a big package on the front porch.

Jake had not forgotten.

In the package were a dozen volumes of poetry—Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth, Kipling, Herrick, Whitman, Swinburne, Browning, translations of Heine, Verlaine and one from the Japanese. Although his name was carefully written on each flyleaf, the "new" smell of the books and

the multitude of uncut leaves convinced me that they were bought for the sole purpose of giving me pleasure.

My hands flew over each book in turn, but it was the Whitman which I first opened, because the name was unknown to me:

Out of the rolling ocean the crowd came a drop gently to me,
Whispering, I love you, before long I die,
I have travell'd a long way merely to look on you, to touch
you,
For I could not die till I once look'd on you,
For I feared I might afterward lose you. . . .

I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable. I sound
my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world. . . .

I turned a few pages.

Out of the cradle endlessly rocking,
Out of the mocking-bird's throat, the musical shuttle,
Out of the Ninth-month midnight.

The magic of the song constricted my throat, seared my
eyes with unshed tears.

Oh, rising stars!

Perhaps the one I want so much will rise—will rise with
some of you.

As I put down the book, I knew that I liked poetry. I
knew, too, that the intangible wall between me and Jake
was fallen—some element of defensiveness was gone from
my attitude. I was neither glad, nor sorry.

I was touched by his kindness—compunctious at having
ordered him from the store.

But my regrets were wasted.

Next day the blue roadster drew up in its usual place promptly at a quarter past twelve.

Jake entered, gaily confident on the surface, but with a certain uneasiness apparent to my eyes.

"I wanted a cherry pie, oh, Guinevere, and I'd forgotten those aprons," he made thin explanation.

"Poetry is . . . marvelous," I said, ignoring his apology.

"Do you like it really?"

I had never known a person could put such delight into five words.

"I came today to tell you a plan I've thought out," he went on hurriedly without waiting for my answer.

"You don't want me to come here, and I can understand why, so won't you let me come to call on you in the evenings—some evening," he amended.

I had a sickening vision of this Balder-like creature in my stiff, bare parlor. It was too incongruous.

I laughed and slowly shook my head.

"But, why, Guinevere? Do I bore you?"

I thought of Marion's oft-repeated inquiry when I declined to let the town boys call.

"But, why, Gretchen, don't you *like* men?"

Marion had been having "dates" for two years, and for this reason gave herself airs in my presence. She regarded it as her duty to bring me out. My refusal to adopt her excellent advice was not due to shyness, as she supposed. How could I tell her that the pimply, pompous youths who rushed her, inspired in me nothing more than a horrified loathing?

Jake was different. But there were equally good reasons why I did not want him to come to my home. One who has lived not unhappily in dreams always shrinks from actuality, I think.

"No, you don't bore me."

"Then *why?*"

I could not answer him.

With an impatient gesture he turned to go. At the door he stopped and came back.

"Give me half a dozen men's handkerchiefs—linen," he requested in a voice saturated with gloom.

But neither of us thought of laughing.

V

A WEEK passed and Jake did not return to the store.

I found that I missed him.

His was the happiest nature I had ever known.

He was all irrepressible gaiety, all frankness, generosity—all delight in life. No wonder our serious-minded, calculating little town distrusted him.

The society of my father and Marion seemed intolerable now. I could not read.

I rebelled against the hard monotony of my life. For the first time I neglected the house.

One Friday evening I went wearily to my room. The dishes were washed, the kitchen in order, the table laid for breakfast.

It was very hot.

The weight of my hair oppressed me. My clothes clung stickily to my body.

I drew off my dark dress and scant underclothing and loosened the coils of my hair. As I turned from the bureau, my eye fell on a calendar July.

This month nine years ago, Lagi had visited me. This month nine years ago, father had given me the savage beating. Would I never forget?

"Slave driver," I cried, shaking my fist at the closed door, "stingy tyrant—wife murderer!"

The complacent, oblivious creak of his chair on the front porch came faintly in reply. There he sat and computed costs and savings—sleek, content!

I threw myself across the bed and wept hot tears of self-pity, for the first time since mother died.

But I was too healthy to continue that sort of thing indefinitely.

After a few moments I went into the bathroom and drew a tub of cold water. In its greenish depths my fatigue lessened and my jagged nerves composed themselves. I so far recovered as to take a melancholy pleasure in the sight of my pale body lapped about with green ripples, and the strange, one-dimensional appearance of my hands under water.

In a fine glow, I stepped out into the hall, just as an automobile stopped before our gate.

"Good evening, sir, is Gretchen in," asked Jake impetuously.

Father was bewildered.

"Why—er—yes, I believe she is. Won't you step in and have a seat?"

I waited to hear no more but ran to my room and began dressing feverishly.

When I descended the stairs, father and Jake were discussing crops. But a bewildered light was apparent in father's eye.

"Hello, Gretchen, can you come for a ride with me?"

"Hello, Jake, yes, I'd love to," I replied with disarming readiness.

"Good evening, sir," said Jake to father.

"We'll be back soon," I told him.

He waved his long hand benignantly, but the bewildered look remained.

I went exulting.

The blue car ran fast, and close to the ground. We went perhaps five miles without a word. Then suddenly Jake stopped the machine and seized both my hands in his.

"My God, how I've missed you, Guinevere," he cried.

But I was shy of lovemaking. Although my mind had been familiar with love for a long time, my body involuntarily shrank from any advances.

"I've missed you too," I told him inadequately, loosening my hands.

He gazed at me oddly through the growing dusk.

Without another word, he started the engine and we went back, silent as we had come.

The house was unlighted. On the porch glowed the end of father's nightly cigar.

"Tomorrow," Jake whispered as we stopped.

"No—I have to stay at the store until late."

"Sunday?"

I nodded imperceptibly.

"Sunday afternoon."

He left me at the steps.

"Good night, Mr. May," he called towards the glowing cigar end.

"Good night, sir," father returned affably enough.

The red light of the roadster sped swiftly up the dark street—disappeared.

I turned to go in.

"Ah, Gretchen, sit down a minute," father stopped me.

I remained standing.

"What is it," I asked.

"I don't care to have you going out alone with that young fellow—he's no particular good—Don't let it happen again."

The tiny coal glowed brightly as he finished.

For a moment resentment held me speechless.

"I shall go out with whomever I please," I retorted coldly at last.

"Not if I forbid you!"

"Especially if you forbid me."

Father rose hastily and towered threateningly over me. But the era of effective bullying was past.

"What are you saying, miss?" he demanded.

"Exactly what you hear," I replied.

We faced each other for a long moment—two defiant wills. Then he turned away.

Here was a fact not contained in the Encyclopedia of Useful Knowledge—and he was helpless in the face of it.

VI

THAT drive marked the beginning of our close companionship. Almost every evening the blue roadster stopped at our gate; on Sundays Jake and I were together afternoon and evening.

With his admirable capacity for adjusting himself to the inevitable, father accepted the situation calmly. There was a curt admonition to the effect that my salary would be cut if there was any perceptible lessening of efficiency on my part, but this did not worry me. Also: "See that you don't get talked about," he told me, "it would hurt my position."

My years of Spartan training now stood me in good stead. Without them my health must have broken under the strain of cruelly hard work, comparatively late hours, and constant excitement.

For Jake's society was very heady. It was a stimulant which made me forget any weariness, however great. He would affix a postage stamp to a letter with an enthusiasm sufficient to lead a rebel army to victory. The present moment was the most important consideration in life. He was bent on extracting every ounce of enjoyment from it.

He was full of plans. Sometimes he would come bursting into the store on a busy morning, each blond hair on his head quivering with life, and stand waiting his

turn—patiently enough, but bristling with a suppressed excitement which conveyed itself to me and made me painfully nervous.

Then he would buy whatever was nearest at hand and over the counter propose some vital scheme or other.

“Don’t eat much dinner tonight, oh, Guinivere,” he urged on one of these occasions, “because Phronsie has made ready a lunch fit for the gods, and you and I will feast by moonlight at the edge of the lake eight-thirty, *sharp!*”

After a more than usually hectic rush with dinner and dishes, I slipped on a new dress (I had begun to spend money recklessly) and was ready for Jake when he came.

We drove to the lake and stopped the car within a few feet of the shallow ripples that splashed on its shore.

Jake pointed to the opposite side.

“Over there, Guinevere,” he began in a tone mysteriously hushed, “the moon will rise and make a shining path across the lake for us. Would you like to walk with me to the moon? Perhaps she’ll make twin stars of us—you, a gorgeous, coppery planet, and I a pale yellow satellite. Or we might rather live in the moon—do you think they have stores in the moon, Guinevere?”

“They say the dark spots are mountain ranges,” I replied in all seriousness.

Jake’s laughter rang out.

That was the worst of it. I never could tell when he meant what he said and when it was just banter.

“You’re too innocent for Guinevere, I think I shall call you Elaine,” he teased me.

The moon rose and, as Jake had predicted, a wide crinkly gold pathway led straight from us to her.

"How would you like to sail along there in a snow white barge—all dead, and covered with lilies, Guinevere?"

"I don't know about the barge," I replied, "but, if I were ever to kill myself, I think I'd plunge into moon-lit water as the most romantic way."

"If you could wait for the moon . . . ! Don't do it, child, the water's just as cold under moonlight."

He broke off abruptly.

"What are we waiting for?"

The big basket was brought out and unpacked.

"Now for the big treat," Jake exclaimed when that was done. He rummaged in a pocket of the car and brought forth a long-necked bottle and two glasses.

I watched him in consternation.

"Have you ever tasted champagne, Guinevere?"

"Oh, Jake, then you do drink," I cried sorrowfully.

"Only on special occasions," he assured me, "and this is a very 'special occasion.'"

I refused to be mollified.

"I don't want any," I told him.

"But, my dear, it's nothing but wine. It won't make a surly wife-beater out of an honest workingman!"

"You drink other things, too, don't you, Jake?"

"Sometimes."

I turned and walked away from him along the edge of the lake.

He came after me, and catching my elbows turned me about so that I faced him.

"Does it honestly make you so unhappy," he asked looking intently at me.

I nodded.

"Terribly."

"Then, God knows, if you really care that much, I've no right to do it—do you care . . . dear?"

"It frightens me—drinking," I sobbed.

"Then, I'll never, never again," Jake promised solemnly.

"Never again. . . . Kiss me, Guinevere. I love you so!"

"Tell you what," Jake said presently, "suppose we each take a tiny glassful to celebrate," he kissed me again joyously, "and then throw the rest of the bottle out into the lake!"

"You're sure it won't make me feel funny," I hesitated.

"Not a bit—make you feel serious and act funny!"

But I knew this was meant to tease me.

We touched glasses.

"Never again," he groaned.

"Never again," I echoed, but happily.

The half-empty bottle hung between us and the moon, dipped, disappeared under the water in a spray of glinting drops.

Jake spoke its epitaph with uncovered head.

"Mumms Extra-dry," he said reverently.

VII

Bit by bit Jake wormed out of me an account of my duties. It was hard to withhold because I so often gave work as my excuse for not falling in with his plans.

"What do you do—besides stay in the store—now tell me, like a good girl," he begged one day.

I was too tired to resist. My pride was napping.

Beginning with my six-thirty, alarm clock awakening, I gave him an outline of a typical day in my life.

Jake sat crouched over the steering wheel of the blue roadster. During my recital he neither spoke nor moved, except to grip the wheel more tightly at times.

"But, Gretchen, your father has money," he burst out wonderingly when I had finished. "Why, even when I was a kid, I used to hear Dad speak of him as one of the solidest men in town."

I had no reply to this.

"The God-damned old miser! . . . Oh, I beg your pardon, darling, I forgot."

"You needn't apologize," I said without emotion, "I hate him. He beat me once."

"Oh, God, oh, my darling! By God, I'll kill him, sweetheart!"

His face was drained of color, the big veins of his neck showed purple above his low collar. He was trembling so violently that my own nerves vibrated in response.

"It's no use . . . they'd only kill you afterwards."

"I don't care. It's worth it!"

He jammed in the clutch and the roadster leapt forward.

"Stop, Jake and let me talk to you," I begged, panicky with fear. "Think of me—just for this once."

"I am," he retorted grimly, but he reluctantly brought the car to a stop.

"You're not! Do you think I want to be the cause of my father's death, and yours? Even if it didn't come to that, there'd be a nasty scandal. . . . You can't do anything, dear—anything at all."

"If I can't kill him, it'll kill me," he groaned. "The—the—the old ghoul! Oh, Gretchen! He *struck* you!"

Abruptly he bent over the wheel and gave way to dry, terrible sobbing.

I tried to comfort him.

"It was long ago, dear—don't, please don't, Jake!"

His shoulders continued their spasmodic heaving.

"Jake, don't you see that I can't ever tell you anything, if you're going to act like this."

He raised his head suddenly and struck the side of the car a great blow with his fist.

"By God, there *is* something I can do! I can marry you and take you out of it!"

I sat without breathing. Here was an escape I had not thought of—at least, had thought of as possible only in some dim future.

"We'll be married before I go back to Cornell—and you can stay here with mother and Phronsie until I graduate—mother'll love you, Gretchen."

I thought of the stiff, black-clad figure of Mrs. Frazer, of our constrained conversation when we met in the store.

"Do you think so?" I asked dubiously.

"Do I? Why she's bound to. She loves me and I love her and I love you and you love me. . . . You and she have too much in common not to be congenial!"

He was growing more and more enthusiastic.

"Why haven't I thought of it before! Please say you'll marry me, Guinevere. . . . I want you so!"

"I love you," I replied.

He drew me into his arms and kissed my eyes and lips and throat.

"Father mustn't know," I warned.

Jake laughed gleefully, with a quick change of mood. The savage fury of a moment before had given place to a boyish maliciousness.

"We'll cost the old skinflint a pretty penny yet. . . . Prices have gone up, Mr. May! . . . He'll soon be spending more than fourteen a week for his clerk, cook, housekeeper!"

VIII

I SETTLED the last drapery of my lace evening dress—gave a quick dab at my nose with a powder puff and turned, satisfied, from the mirror.

Marion watched me appreciatively from her seat on the bed.

"Well, I must say, Gret, that when you did start you started with a bang," she remarked.

I smiled in a preoccupied fashion.

"Does my dress hang right?"

"It's gorgeous; you look stunning, simply stunning," she replied wholeheartedly. "I know now why you'd never be bothered with the boys here—you were waiting for bigger game, sly dog!"

"No I wasn't, honestly, Marion," I protested, unwill-

ing to accept this implication of snobbishness, "but there's something about Jake that's . . . different!"

"Well, I should hope so," she agreed, rising languidly. "They say he can drink more liquor to his size than any man in New York state."

"It's a lie," I cried heatedly, "he doesn't drink—any more!"

"Why—have you reformed him?"

She laughed knowingly.

"Remember, my dear, that you can't change a man's nature overnight, nor in three months, either. Besides, *you* couldn't tell if he had been drinking."

I felt that I hated Marion then. Her smug, confident attitude of patronage enraged me more than I ever dreamed it could.

"I'd be more likely to know than you, at any rate, since I'm with him somewhat more often," I retorted frigidly.

She looked at me in surprise.

"Why, Gret, I didn't know you were *in love* with him!"

"Well, I am!"

Marion sat down abruptly.

"My dear! How exciting! Why didn't you tell me before. . . . Are you going to be married?"

"In the fall."

"Oh, Gret, I'm simply overcome, I never . . ."

The honk of an automobile cut short her exclamations.

"Heavens, there he is. I must fly, I look such a sight. No, you go on, and I'll leave after you've got him out of the way."

She gave me a quick squeeze and, throwing a light wrap about my shoulders, pushed me out of the door.

"Come over and tell me all about it tomorrow," she whispered.

I nodded and ran down the stairs.

Jake was beating a tattoo on the porch floor with an impatient foot.

"I thought you were never coming, sweetheart," he greeted me. "Mother's out in the car."

Jake had persuaded me to go to a dance at a country club some miles away. I had agreed, to please him. The presence of his politely formal mother was a concession to convention which we dismally decided would have to be made.

Jake had never seen me in evening clothes before. When I came out of the dressing room with his mother he looked at me as if for the first time.

"Isn't she divine, mother," he demanded eagerly.

"Gretchen is very pretty indeed," Mrs. Frazer conceded with a smile which did not succeed in conveying cordiality.

"Pretty," he scoffed, "she's the best-looking girl in forty-eight states."

"I'm so proud of you, Guinevere," he whispered, as Mrs. Frazer turned away to speak to an acquaintance.

He swung me out on the crowded floor to the wailing strains of a new waltz.

I thought with scorn of my father. What a mean mind he had! When I told him that I meant to go to this dance and that he would have to get someone to work for me

(it was Saturday), all he said was: "It'll cost you two dollars."

"What do I care for two dollars," I retorted grandly.

"Well, well," he said jocularly, "hoe your own row, my dear, but you'll learn some day that a dollar commands respect."

Two dollars for this . . . ! The rhythm of the dance, the music rising and falling, Jake's arm about me. I was half-dazed with sensation.

Jake, too, had become more joyous, more alive. His eyes whenever they rested on me seemed to plead—command!

We left at twelve. Mrs. Frazer had a headache.

"Make him come straight home, Gretchen," she said as she left us at her door. She shook her finger playfully at me. "I know how young people are!"

IX

"No, Jake, you mustn't kiss me," I protested in a whisper as he seized my hands to draw me towards him.

He looked at me sombrely.

"What's the matter?"

"It's late—and you know what your mother said—besides, father may not be asleep."

"It won't take but a second," he made answer to my objections.

I sighed.

"You know, Jake, that if you kiss me, it will be half an hour before I can get you home."

"I never could understand why girls have such a poor opinion of themselves," he remarked to no one in particular.

But I was not to be ridiculed out of my determination.

"Think what you please," I told him indifferently, "so long as you go now."

"Why are you so cold sometimes, Guinevere? Last night you loved me, and tonight you don't care a damn."

"I love you just as much, but I can't always act the same."

"I do."

I made no reply. Jake stood in pale moonlight at the foot of the steps and looked up at me. He was so beautiful, so gloriously *alive*! It was not easy to keep my resolution.

"Guinevere," he called as if from a great distance, magically. "Guinevere—you are so beautiful!—Guinevere—come out and dance with me!"

His voice laid a queer spell on my will. Unconsciously my foot moved down a step . . . drew back.

"You're not a woman, but a dryad, Guinevere, and I am Pan!"

He leaned forward, a quick daring in face and voice.

"Guinevere, I *dare* you to take off your dress and dance under the moon with me!"

I quivered as if I had been struck. I felt my eyes grow dark with emotion. Mother's voice sounded in my brain, that usually plaintive voice now energized with indignation.

"The common little beast . . . the common little beast!"

Father, calm and collected, stalking purposefully from the house. . . .

Jake was watching my face intently.

"I didn't mean to hurt you, darling," he cried remorsefully now. "I only meant that you're too beautiful to be hidden under clothes!"

"You said that to me once before," I told him with painful slowness, "when I was a little girl. . . . Oh, you're *dirty*, Jake!—you've always been dirty! Go away and don't ever come back here."

"Was that you?" Jake asked, staring at me amazed. Then:

"You don't mean that you would hold against me what I said when I was a kid," he blurted out incredulously. "Besides," he hurried on, ignoring my attempted interruption, "your father got me suspended from school for a year—isn't that punishment enough?—Everybody says I'm wild well, maybe I am. But don't you think I got a pretty good start when I had to stay at home all one year and had people asking why, and suspecting the worst about me? You've never been a social pariah—it isn't pleasant. I'd see boys my age going to school every morning and me left with nothing to do but think up devilment. Did you ever realize that? You hurt me worse than I hurt you—I didn't know I was saying anything criminal that day. It was just my way of telling you I thought you were pretty."

His words came tumbling over each other—pleas, explanations, denials.

How far *had* my mother's smug righteousness, my father's caution influenced this man before me? What would have been different if either of them had displayed a gleam of sane reason? And I was the indirect cause . . . !

Jake saw that I was won.

"So now we're quits about that, aren't we, dearest?"

"You weren't to blame—I'm sorry," I told him.

"Then kiss and make up—and I'll dash home!"

All softened, regretful, I leaned towards him.

"Sweetheart," he whispered close to my face.

Even now I can recall the thrill of horrified repulsion which shot through me as I caught the stale, unmistakable smell of alcohol on his breath. Wrenching my hands loose, I struck him across the eyes with all my strength.

"You—you—drunkard," I gasped. "Oh, what a fool I am! I might have known! You needn't explain—you can't explain when you fairly reek of whiskey."

"I'm not drunk," he denied furiously. "If I can't take a cocktail without your throwing a fit, I'll go out and show you what a drunkard looks like!"

"Oh, no, you won't because I shan't look. Now go home and don't come back here again . . . ever! Do you understand?"

Jake was pale with rage. When he spoke it was evident that he controlled himself only by a tremendous effort of will.

"Listen, Gretchen, if you send me away like this, before God I *will* get drunk!"

But if he was angry, so was I.

"Get drunk. You're probably glad of an excuse. Do what you like. But I'm through standing by and being lied to and approving while you go to the devil."

I slammed the door and went weeping to my room.

I have never found a convincing explanation for my puritanical attitude that night. Since then, I have had wines and liquors. More than once, I have had—too much. True, drunken men are still distasteful to me, but Jake was not drunk. I often wonder if it was really myself who railed at him so. Perhaps for one moment my mother's watchful ghost took possession of me and directed matters to its satisfaction. Perhaps, her early teaching evidenced itself in a last flare of passionate intolerance. Perhaps, my hurt vanity took revenge in this way for his having lied to me . . . I do not know.

Then, I did not analyze. I only wept. But it was late and I was very tired. Soon my unhappiness was blotted out in a deep slumber.

Once in my dreams I thought I heard the shriek of the blue roadster's horn as it tore past, but the impression was not sufficiently vivid to waken me.

X

FATHER in his Sunday black carefully scraped the tiny deposit of sugar from his coffee cup, licked the spoon and replaced it on the saucer.

Breakfast was over.

"I have some bad news for you, my dear," he said measuredly, directing a quick glance at me.

My heart gave a great, sickening throb, seemed to stop.

"Young Frazer had a nasty smash-up near the lake last night—the car was splintered. They've taken him to the hospital. Wonder he's not dead!"

—I too am untamed—Oh, lady, please don't cry so hard—You're beautiful, Guinevere—Listen, Gretchen, I am Pan—The—the old ghoul!—

Over and over and over. No order in my mind. Jake's face, his words, his laugh. "Wonder he's not dead!"

"Oh, no," I said dazedly, with conviction. "Jake couldn't die."

Father looked at me queerly.

"There's not a dozen whole bones in his body—internal injuries too. He was pinned under the car when they found him. Nobody can make out how it happened. He must ha' been drunk—there was an empty liquor bottle . . ."

With a terrible scream I flung my water glass to the floor.

"Stop it! Stop it, I say—You, you old ghoul!"

"Well, there's no use in breaking up the dishes and abusing me. If you'd listened to me, I warned you against him. . . ."

But I was gone. Like a wounded animal I crept to the solitude of my room.

I understood why Christ went alone to Gethsemane.

XI

MRS. FRAZER'S voice came pleadingly, helplessly over the 'phone.

"You must, Gretchen. He's asked for you."

"I can't. I can't. Don't ask me."

"He's dying, Gretchen!"

"Oh, God, I can't!"

"My poor boy—my poor boy——"

"Tell him I love him."

"Love him!" Her voice was acid with scorn. "You who won't even come to help him die."

"It would kill me. I can't," I wailed despairingly.

"Oh, God will punish you—you hard-hearted girl, you, you Jezebel!"

The receiver slammed down.

Let them think me hard. What did it matter! Jake was dying. I could not bear to distort my memories of him with the picture of his strong body shattered and bandaged—the agony of his battle with death. Without my memories I could not live. Why, if Jake could die there was an end to everything. Nothing could hope to escape.

I could not weep. I tried to pray, but I felt that he would hate the mockery as I did. There was no God.

All day I sat in my room. No one disturbed me. Night came, and the sky was studded with a multitude of stars. I went to bed with a lighted candle beside me (I could not bear the dark) and lay sleepless watching the sky.

Towards morning a fresh breeze arose. It billowed out my curtains, twisted the candle flame. In the east, faint streaks of primrose and blue appeared.

Something seemed to snap within my brain.

Despair came flooding in.

I knew that Balder was dead.

BOOK THREE

I

"HERE you are, Miss May. Can you let us have these before you leave?"

I fingered the thick pile of O. K'd. orders for which I had waited all day, glanced at my wrist watch. It was four o'clock.

The pale youth who was my immediate superior in the office twisted nervously from one foot to the other.

"I know it's late," he admitted apologetically, "but this is rush stuff, and the chief didn't get back from lunch until a few minutes ago to fix it up."

"I'll stay and get them out," I agreed, inwardly seething with resentment.

On the right hand side of my desk were neat stacks of yellow paper, white paper, carbon paper.

I picked up an order: Corday Mfg. Co. That called for two white copies, three yellow copies. My hands arranged the paper swiftly, mechanically. Swiftly, mechanically, my fingers tapped out the bill. The procedure varied but slightly. Sometimes four white copies and two yellow copies were required; sometimes but one of each. This was not a matter for me to decide, however. Long ago a list of customers with the formula for each had been committed to memory. During my first week

with the Ardyle Company I had ventured to inquire what determined the number of copies to be made. The evasiveness of my informers was exceeded only by their surprise at being questioned.

"There's a list on your desk," replied the head stenographer, "if you forget, you can refer to it."

"Why, you see, we need more copies of some bills than we do of others," my pallid superior explained lucidly.

It appeared that a too intimate knowledge of business, as of God, was dangerous.

The unpardonable sin was to arrive late. The first virtue was punctuality; the second, punctuality; the third, likewise. One might sit all day without work, but sit one must for eight hours. If work appeared on the seventh, one often had to sit for nine or ten.

Even at my father's store there had been nothing like this. He had demanded strict punctuality, but there was always something to do, so that his demand never appeared wholly unreasonable.

One day the explanation occurred to me. I was selling not my services, but my time. I was bartering my very life in exchange for a pitiful sum of money.

From that moment my discontent grew and grew.

"Tap-tap-tap."

The pile was diminishing rapidly. I was not inefficient, even in work that I hated.

A spirit of unrest was abroad in the big room.

At desk after desk, girls sat idle, work done for the day—waiting for five o'clock. A few typewriters, like my

own, were going furiously, but an air of expectancy—of release—prevailed.

Miss Martin, the voluble file clerk, interrupted me with well-meaning sympathy.

"It's a shame old J. B. couldn't have got that ready for you this morning."

"Yes—but *he* doesn't have to stay until six o'clock to get it out," I retorted, not ceasing my furious staccato.

"Believe me, if I had to look forward to nothing but this, I don't know how I'd stand it," she went on. "It's something fierce."

Miss Martin's sentiments were my own, but I had no time to approve them unless I wished to prolong my working day indefinitely, so I rebuffed her conversational efforts with non-committal monosyllables. It was an open secret that Miss Martin intended to work only until the end of the year when she was to be married—a consummation to which she referred with unnecessary frequency.

At five the room cleared as if by magic. I was left alone with my bills.

Another hour passed before I closed my desk and deposited a basketful of neatly typed slips in the private office.

As I turned the corner on my way to the subway station, a raw March wind tore at my clothes, all but pulled the hat from my head.

A truck driver whistled at me insolently; a middle-aged man, unperturbed by my icy disregard, kept step with me and cast furtive looks in my direction from time to

time until he lost patience and went his way; boys on street corners made audible remarks as I passed.

How I dreaded that twice-a-day agony!

II

MISS MARTIN'S attitude was typical of the girls in our big office. Business was for them an interlude—something with which to occupy themselves until they should marry. There were exceptions, brisk women who passed in and out of glass doors marked "Private"—plain girls who flung themselves into their bookkeeping and typewriting and filing with utter abandonment.

The lack of interest in their work seemed less the fault of the girls than of the system. There were clerks that would have made excellent gardeners—typists who enjoyed nothing more than rendering occasional first-aid. But they were all shot into business as a career that called for little preparation and consequently could be abandoned without too much waste of money and training.

Many of these girls were better educated than men who were their superiors. One stenographer, a Vassar graduate, took dictation from a high official of the company who was incapable of writing correct English.

For me, office routine, the complete absorption in detail, the magnifying of inconsequentialities, had been a godsend. It had enabled me to fight off the despair which had threatened to engulf me at Jake's death.

After that Sunday there was but one thought in my

mind—to get away. To stay on with Jake dead was like living in a tomb.

One day I found myself at the railroad station asking the price of a ticket to New York. The next day I drew a hundred dollars from the bank and left, without saying goodbye to anyone. It was a protective measure. I believe that if I had remained in the store I should have lost my mind.

The immensity, the strangeness of the city acted as an opiate. My senses became numbed as anaesthetized flesh.

I spent my first night in New York at a hotel for women. I remembered the name from a remark of Lagi's many years before.

"Mama and I always stop there," she had added. "All nice women do. It's very safe."

I wanted to be safe.

One of the women in charge found a room for me next day. And within a week, she had ferreted out a position for me at Ardyle's, I was through with stores!

It was due to her persuasions that I finally wrote my father—but not before I had been working for several weeks.

His answer closed our correspondence.

"You have made your own bed and now you must expect to lie in it without any help from me. When you've discovered your mistake, you can come back to the store on the old basis."

Not "if", but "when"!

The possibility of retreating had not occurred to me,

but, if it had, his complacency would have effectively prevented my doing so.

I *versus* the world!

It was a not unstimulating thought.

For a year I went to the office promptly, unquestioningly . . . glad to be part of a machine. At night I returned to my third floor room after a meagre dinner at a dairy restaurant, too tired for thought or regrets.

But gradually I came back to my normal self. Again the old questioning began. Unlike the other girls with whom I worked, I did not look forward to marriage as an escape from the monotony of the office. My home life had planted in me a profound distrust of the institution. So definite an expectation would have been a relief.

My reachings out were without direction. My gropings were so vague as to produce nothing positive, only a colossal unrest within myself. I was teased by the very mystery of my desires.

What I wanted, I could not tell—but I was convinced that this was not life, for me.

III

It was my custom to lunch at a restaurant some four blocks from the office. Here for a moderate price one could obtain sufficient food to produce the illusion of satisfaction.

One day in April, however, Miss Martin came to work wearing a solitaire, and insisted that we should celebrate

the appearance of this outward and visible sign by lunching at a certain well-known hotel.

"It will be my party," she told me.

But I had never learned to accept gracefully. I insisted on paying my share.

To this she finally consented.

Our request for an extra half-hour was granted and we boarded the subway with all the exhilaration of children setting out upon a wonderful adventure.

I had come to like Miss Martin. She was so irrepressibly friendly. The lack of reserve in her manner had ceased to offend me to the same extent as it did at first. She reminded me a little of Marion—of a Marion minus the element of bigotry. Always too fastidious, I never became confidential with her, I was lonely and she was an amusing companion.

But, if I withheld my confidence, Miss Martin did not. There was no phase of her life with which I was not familiar. She even told me the amount of her salary.

She brought endless kodak pictures of her fiancé to the office and showed them to me, meanwhile watching my face eagerly to discover the effect produced.

With the memory of Jake's beauty fresh in my heart, I thought her little bank clerk a rather sorry specimen, but I was careful not to reveal a trace of this attitude in my expression. There was something pathetic in her happiness. I would not have hurt her for the world. That any one could be joyful at the prospect of exchanging desk for cookstove, a Brooklyn flat for a Harlem flat seemed preposterous to me. Apparently she conceived of

marriage as the alchemy that would transmute the existence for which she was preparing into some gorgeously tinted fairyland.

Watching her and listening to her, I felt immeasurably older, though in fact this was not the case. A dozen times I was on the point of warning her that marriage might not "pan out" as she expected, but something always held me back. Perhaps I was restrained by a recognition of the futility of such a course; perhaps, by a realization that, lacking other resources, marriage was Miss Martin's only bet—or it may have been that Jake's death had produced in me an almost morbid fear of tampering with other people's lives.

On the way uptown Miss Martin chattered volubly. I listened to endless panegyrics on Dicky—Dicky's cleverness, his generousness, his success at the bank. Time after time, I had to admire the solitaire.

"*I wanted platinum,*" she confessed, "*but Dicky is so sensible. He said 'what's the use of paying twice as much for a fad.'*"

"The gold is beautiful," I assured her, "and you've said you didn't like platinum wedding rings. This will look much better with a gold one."

"Yes, I guess you're right," she submitted, "but I did want platinum. . . . Men are so conservative, aren't they?"

"Some of them," I agreed with bitterness.

I had never been in a big hotel. As we entered the marble, palm-strewn lobby, I gasped in sheer astonishment at the spectacle of such luxury.

To the right, open doors revealed the interiors of rooms sumptuously fitted with writing desks and tables and easy chairs. The floors were covered by thick velvet rugs, in color, a smoke grey.

To the left, was a long vista of tables.

Somewhere an orchestra played.

A marvelous change had come over Miss Martin. I could hardly recognize in her my co-worker at Ardyle and Company's. As she crossed the lobby to the dining room, her bearing was gracious, commanding. She indicated a table in a corner near the orchestra where we could talk freely without being overheard. The glassy-eyed headwaiter became just the least bit deferential.

How I envied Miss Martin: I might feel superior in every other way, but some sub-stratum of honesty compelled me to admit that I could not have subdued that headwaiter as she did.

Since then I have acquired the manner, but I have never out-lived an instinctive awe of those all but omnipotent beings. There is a certain grim comprehension in their gaze that never fails to impress—and more or less disconcert—me. I think the Recording Angel must have something of a headwaiter's look.

Miss Martin perused the bill of fare with superficial indifference, but I was frankly interested. I wanted to order everything with French names to find out what they were. However, as I did not know how to pronounce them, I reluctantly confined my attention to the more intelligible items.

If Miss Martin's sophistication scored, my triumph was

greater in another way. She called my attention to the fact. "You're the hit of the meal," she whispered laughingly to me over the soup.

I looked around, surprised.

It was true that I was being stared at.

Men with women companions stole stealthy looks at me between mouthfuls. Those who were alone, gazed openly.

I hastily turned back to my food, hot with embarrassment. There had been something in the men's eyes that confused me, in spite of my naive satisfaction at having created a sensation. At the time I did not realize what the disturbing element was in those glances. Since then, I have discovered that perhaps in no place does sex stalk more openly than in public dining rooms.

Over the dessert, I noticed a short, heavy-set man crossing the room towards us.

He paused at our table and spoke to me jocularly.

"Want to be on the lot early tomorrow morning, Madeline," he said. "We begin shooting at eight sharp."

I looked at him, too bewildered to be angry. Miss Martin stared in open-mouthed astonishment.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I protested.

"Aw, go on," he scoffed. "I ain't joking. Sedgwick got the sets ready sooner than he expected. I been trying all morning to get you on the 'phone."

I looked from him to Miss Martin—back again—in search of a clue.

"Say, you're Madeline Montrose all right, ain't you," the stranger asked somewhat impatiently.

"Oh, no . . . oh, no indeed," I denied emphatically.

His swarthy face twisted into ludicrous lines of amazement.

"Well, I'm . . . My God, you must be! . . . Then you're her double—voice and all. . . . Me, a director in her company! . . . In the profession?"

I shook my head, only half understanding.

"No, I'm not."

"Well. . . . You ought to be," he shot out. "That's a good one on me. . . . Good Lord!"

With a last incredulous inspection of me, he turned and walked back abruptly to his own table.

Miss Martin gave an ecstatic sign.

"Wouldn't that jar you?" she asked.

"Who's Madeline Montrose," I wanted to know.

"You mean to say. . . . Where *do* you come from, anyway?" she stammered. "Madeline Montrose is the International's new star. Funny, I *thought* you looked like somebody I'd seen. Good Heavens, you must be the image of her, or one of her own directors wouldn't have mistaken you for her . . . I thought at first he was stalling (this is an awful place for pick-ups) but he was on the level. Aren't you thrilled to death?"

I shook my head.

Miss Martin shrugged in good natured irritation.

"You are the limit," she cried.

But my denial was true enough. I was not thrilled then.

The significance of the incident did not occur to me until late that night.

It was hot and I could not sleep. My bed was pushed

up against the one window, but the air that drifted in was sultry—stale.

Suddenly in the blackness of the room, I saw again the dark, heavy face of the International's director—saw the appraising look with which he had surveyed me.

"In the profession? . . . Well, you ought to be!"

IV

I CONTINUED to regard my work at the office as drudgery, but no longer as drudgery from which there was no immediate escape. Those magic words had revealed to me a possibility which I had never considered before.

The Screen—! My active imagination pictured the film star's career as a sort of triumphal progress from success to success. The fabulous salaries, the adulation, the luxury with which they were surrounded made a tremendous appeal to my sensuous nature. The publicity worried me not a little. I think my instincts have always been aristocratic, and I could never face the possibility of seeing my name in print without feeling a surge of repulsion. The monstrous lithographic advertisements in front of motion picture theatres offended me even more—truly, those who succeeded paid a price.

I had passed through my teens without one stage-struck tremor. Like many diseases, it seemed the more dangerous for coming late.

I bought quantities of "movie" magazines. Every evening I recklessly squandered forty cents in indulging my newly acquired passion for the silent drama. I be-

came familiar with the stars—at least, the brighter stars—I learned their companies, and their plans, and their domestic difficulties.

Still I took no step towards realizing my dream.

The office was becoming more and more uninteresting. I now did my work mechanically, half-heartedly, with my mind on Gloria Glendon's wardrobe, or Chappy Ranson's hair-raising achievements.

But the office was a known evil, at any rate; whereas, this business of acting was said to be fraught with a multitude of dangers which loomed larger because of their indefiniteness.

There was one thing about which all the magazines were most emphatic.

Gloria Glendon, it was true, made fifty thousand dollars a month—but Gloria had earned it, likewise the others.

The magazines somewhat revised my ideas about the life of a star. But I was not discouraged. Indeed, the attitude which I now assumed was worse for me than my previous glorification of the profession. I faced all the unpleasant features and accepted them as being not too great to overbalance the advantages. Just as several years before I had accepted my father's hard terms for an increase in salary.

My decision once made, it is not strange that a few days later I found myself during lunch hour at the International's studio.

I stopped for a moment in front of the dingy brick building and gazed at the shining brass door plate.

"International Photo-plays, Inc." My throat tight-

ened with emotion. Those doors were the entrance to the Promised Land.

A man came out and stood on the steps lighting a cigar. He looked at me curiously.

Overcome with shyness I hurried up the street. At the corner I turned. The man was gone.

I nerved myself for a second try, retraced my steps and entered the awful portals.

The door opened on a little hallway crossed by a wooden railing behind which sat a boy with slick black hair. As I came in he jumped up obsequiously and opened a swinging door in the railing.

"Good morning, Miss Madeline," he greeted me.

"I'm not Miss Madeline," was my answer as I passed through.

The boy made an exaggerated bow.

"Good morning, Miss *Montrose*," he amended with mock humility, and hurried off to a door marked "Casting Director."

"Miss Montrose is here," I heard him say.

It was inconceivable, this being mistaken for another person. But, I told myself, there was no use explaining to the impudent, slick-haired boy. The casting director would know.

"Go right in," the boy invited me, returning to his seat behind the railing.

The casting director was, unexpectedly, a woman—a business-like person with shrewd, tired eyes.

"I didn't expect you so early," she said to me, "have a seat. What do you say to giving the Dupré girl the

part of your maid? She's awfully pretty, of course, but such a different type that—"

"I'm not Madeline Montrose," I interrupted frantically.

"You're not What?"

"I told that boy I was not, but he didn't believe me," I defended myself.

Her astonishment was no less real than had been that of the man who addressed me at lunch six weeks ago, but she concealed it better.

"Then who are you, and what do you want?"

"My name is Gretchen May—and I want to get into pictures."

"Gretchen May what?"

"Just Gretchen *May*."

"Real name?"

"Yes."

"Hm!"

She considered for a minute, absently biting the end of a pencil.

"There may be something next week—I'll have to discuss it with—several others. Can you come around on Monday? We're not working this week."

"Oh, yes," I agreed eagerly.

"Now give me your address and telephone number."

She made entries in a big book.

"Monday morning," she reminded me again, with a last puzzled look.

I left the studio in a glow of happiness. Those writers

must have magnified difficulties considerably. It was easy to get in, I thought optimistically.

I'd have to let my job go—one had to be ready when they called, or get left. I still had over three hundred dollars in the bank at home—the remainder of my savings. Since coming to New York I had been careful not to touch this little hoard. It was for an emergency. Now the emergency for which I'd looked forward so long had come.

No more bills—no more eight hour days at work that I detested!

Such sacrifices as I might make—and I told myself that *no* sacrifice was too great—would be made to advance me in a field which I had chosen to enter; not one into which I had been thrust by circumstances, against my will.

I reached the office fifteen minutes late, saw with elation the suggestive look that my youthful boss directed towards the clock.

I walked up to his desk and faced him squarely.

"I'm leaving on Saturday," I said briefly.

He was disconcerted. I was a good billing-clerk.

"Don't you like it here?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, very well—but I've had an offer of a better position."

He pondered for a while.

"We've had you in mind, Miss May," he said finally, "and have intended to push you right ahead as soon as openings occurred—It might be possible. . . . Would you stay for twenty-five a week?"

This was a big advance. Twenty-five a week . . .

sure money, against nebulous hundreds of thousands. . . . I was tempted. Security was dear to my soul, but the gambling instinct was even stronger.

I shook my head decisively.

"I'm sorry, but I can't—thank you."

He looked affronted, as if I had offered him a personal insult.

"Oh, very well," he said loftily.

The last bridge was burned.

V

DURING the days that intervened between my visit to the studio and the end of the week, I was far too busy to have time for any qualms as to the wisdom of the step I had taken.

There was a new girl to be instructed in the details of my work—various odds and ends to be cleared up.

But on Saturday when I was leaving, the realization came sickeningly that my security was gone. Perhaps I could never again anticipate a definite sum each week—perhaps I might fail utterly in my new undertaking and be reduced to the humiliating necessity of job hunting.

I had not felt so footloose even when I had left home to come to New York.

Miss Martin wept a little when I told her goodbye. She was a mercurial creature.

"Please call me up when you get settled," she begged, "and come to see me."

"I'd love to," I promised her.

But I never did.

By the time I was settled, Miss Martin had receded to a shadowy place in a past which I did not like to remember. There was never anything in common between us, except our loneliness and humanity.

Still, I have often thought of her and wondered if she is as happy with Dicky in her Harlem flat as she expected to be. I have no idea that she would think me very lucky indeed, with my view of the river, and my richly furnished apartment, and my Chinese butler and my generous lover.

She would be rather naive about it, with countless "ohs" said "ahs"—regard it as a big adventure. There was no envy or intolerance in Miss Martin.

One Christmas I made out a check for a hundred dollars to send her, just for the feel of giving presents to someone. As I was sealing the envelope, I remembered something I once read about the sentimentality of fallen women. My damnable pride made me burn the thing.

On Saturday and Sunday after leaving the office, I went about in a fever heat of excitement. I tried on my dresses a dozen times in order to be sure that the one I had selected to wear on Monday was most becoming. I supplied myself with cold cream, grease paint and heavy powder and experimented with various make-ups.

Monday morning I was ushered into a dressing room at the International without any loss of time, and told to prepare myself for a try-out.

When I emerged, my face a pale yellow mask of paint,

it was to find a knot of people in one corner of the big, glass-roofed studio, discussing something excitedly. They hushed as I appeared but one of them, my hotel acquaintance, nudged his neighbor surreptitiously, and knowing glances were exchanged.

"So you decided to take my advice," he said to me amiably.

Without waiting for the obvious answer, he issued a number of curt directions to some waiting men.

"Yes, Mr. Lowenbein," they replied with alacrity.

I was instructed where to stand.

The lights were turned on—great screens of greenish blue color that transformed the whiteness of my skin into a deathlike grey—that turned my nails and finger tips to purple.

The camera was started.

"Now, turn to the left—back—slowly. . . . Now, look down—smile."

This continued for perhaps five minutes before Mr. Lowenbein was satisfied.

At last he nodded to the photographer.

"Fine—all right, Miss May."

I stepped from behind the blinding lights.

Mr. Lowenbein came forward rubbing his hands delightedly.

"All to the good," he told me. "Wouldn't be surprised if you made a great little actress some day—We can't tell until we get the film developed."

"How long will it be?" I asked, quivering with nervous excitement.

"Oh—day after tomorrow. Come in then."

I returned to the dressing room to remove my make-up. Already I was feeling sophisticated, and at home in the big, barn-like studio, dusty, cluttered with sets, permeated by a fascinating medley of odors.

As I was leaving, the slick-haired boy rose to open the door for me.

"Say, you thought I was kidding you when you come in last week, but, honest, I thought you was Miss Montrose, and was just trying to be up-stage!"

"That's all right—"

"Jimmie," he supplied.

"That's all right, Jimmie," I forgave him. "They all do."

"Well, you should worry," he consoled me. "She's some looker."

"Oh, no, I don't worry," I replied cheerfully.

But it was my ill-fated resemblance to Madeline Montrose that plunged me into abject wretchedness two days later.

As I walked eagerly into the casting director's office I became aware of a marked change in her manner.

"Oh, yes," she said in an off-hand way, "you were here on Monday for a try-out. . . ."

Some premonition of disaster seized me in an icy grip. I merely nodded. Speech was impossible.

"Well—you don't photograph well—I'm sorry, but we can't use you."

"But—but," I stammered hopelessly.

"There's nothing to be done about it," she remarked

with finality. "The try-out was a failure. You'd much better forget all about acting, and try something else."

The 'phone rang and she turned to answer it with an air of terminating our interview.

Dazed and sick at heart, I groped my way into the hall and started towards the door.

Someone laid a hand on my arm, and I turned to see Jimmie, finger to lips, beckoning mysteriously.

I leaned towards him.

"Don't you believe a word of it," he whispered. "You looked like a million dollars in the try-out. I heard 'em. It's Montrose. She got scared—wouldn't have you in the company. They had an awful row . . . but what she says goes. She's got a drag with the big bug."

I looked at him—consternation and relief struggling within me.

"Then I wasn't a failure," I breathed softly.

He grunted contemptuously.

"Not so's you'd notice it!"

Tears welled into my eyes.

"Oh, Jimmie, you are good to tell me this," I cried.

"Always glad to oblige a good-looking lady," he said roughly, as he opened the door and bowed me out like a princess.

VI

I LEFT the studio too dazed for consecutive thought. But back in my hot, third-story room this mood was quickly succeeded by one of resentment so keen that I

felt the only way I could get relief would be to do physical violence on someone.

The whole structure of my plans had been levelled to the dust by the jealousy of a woman I had never seen. With one petulant word she had been able to destroy my hopes—to snatch away my means of earning a living at work that I liked. My anger focused on Madeline Montrose—absurd name! God, how I hated her!

All day I sat there in the semi-darkness of my room into which the May heat billowed in a sickly tide from the roofs. The passion of fury within me, reaching a climax from time to time in electric-like shocks, had not spent itself by nightfall.

At last, exhausted by emotion, and lack of food, I crawled miserably into bed and went to sleep.

In the morning my state of mind was different. The impotent rage of the day before had given place to an almost savage determination to succeed in spite of them. My hatred of Miss Montrose had congealed into an icy point of resolution—to get even was my dominating thought. But I could wait.

I considered what was best to be done. There was no immediate necessity for finding work. My precious savings would take care of the food and lodgings question for some time yet. With careful husbanding, I might even get through the summer. After that—I would not let myself think of what might happen after that. To admit myself beaten and return to the typing of endless, meaningless bills—almost any alternative was preferable.

After a hearty breakfast at my dairy restaurant, I set out on a round of the studios.

My appearance aroused interest and comment, but the answer was always the same with slight variations.

"Nothing just now—perhaps next week. You might run in then."

I seemed to have struck a dull time in the industry.

Day after day my performance was repeated with the same fruitless results. There was little or no work being done at any of the studios, and when an extra was needed, there were any number of experienced actors to be had.

Little by little my money disappeared. Eight dollars a week for room, ten dollars for food, had been my original allowance. As May slipped into June and June into July, I moved to a higher, smaller room in the same house for which I paid only six dollars. It was little more than a closet—not so large as the bathroom at home—but I was too grateful for the saving of a few dollars to make unfavorable comparisons.

By sleeping until nine-thirty or ten, and eating a combined breakfast-lunch about eleven-thirty, I managed to save two dollars more. I was afraid to economize too much on food because of its effect on my health.

It was a strenuous life that I led, with the continual trudging about from studio to studio, the interminable waits, and the mental strain I suffered from anxiety and uncertainty.

But I learned much about human nature during those hours spent outside casting directors' offices. There is

almost no type that cannot be found there. Perhaps the most pitiable were the old actors with their shabby, scrupulously brushed clothes, and their courtly manners. They were always just on the eve of some lucrative engagement—But, was there anything to be had in the studios until it should begin?

Sometimes there was—more often there was not. In either case it was their habit to present an equable, unmoved front to the world, to depart leisurely, slightly bored, usually flecking an imaginary bit of dust from the one carefully pressed coat sleeve before settling the hats on their grey, magnificent heads.

There were women with their daughters, preened out as if for sale, who grew combative after a number of refusals.

But there seemed to be no situation which the casting director was incapable of handling with the minimum loss of time.

“Nothing today.”

“But,” the irate mother would protest, “you *told* us to come in today!”

“You came at your own risk—there was no guarantee of work.”

The imperturbable director would turn to the next applicant, completely oblivious of the glares and voluble complaints of the disappointed woman.

August came. My bank book showed a balance of only one hundred dollars. Still I made my rounds, now more from habit than from any hope of getting an engagement.

I was like a blind man adrift in a canoe. Unless help came, some disaster was inevitable, but I could not tell what its nature would be.

My only consolation in those weeks was the friendship of a girl whom I met at one of the studios. She was an actress on the legitimate stage, who occupied the barren time between engagements by working in the "movies."

I have never made friends easily, but there was a something wistful and untouched about Alicia's face that attracted me.

From time to time I encountered her, and one day she asked me to come to see her. After that, we regularly dined together at inexpensive table d'hôte places, and often spent our evenings in her room or mine, talking interminably.

I told her my story and was rewarded by a fund of shrewd advice and suggestions.

Alicia hated New York, which I could never understand—for with all my hard treatment at its hands I loved it just the same, and she hated the stage. Her one desire was to find some well-off man who would marry her and take her away from everything associated with her present life.

She had the most romantic ideas about the country. For her, the very word symbolized peace and normal living, and contentment.

She referred vaguely to an up-state suitor who was besieging her.

"Then, why don't you marry him?" I suggested.

She colored faintly and looked away.

"Because he hasn't mentioned it," Alicia said. "Oh, you know how they are, or perhaps you don't," she went on with bitter violence. "They meet you after the show, and then draw their own conclusions because you're in a musical comedy, and then they *hound* you to get what they want!"

We were silent for a moment.

"Why don't you send him away?" I asked at last.

"Because I think he's so crazy about me that he'll accept my terms—He's no Romeo, and if he gets me, he'll have to marry me first. . . . Don't look shocked—you've never had to play one night stands year after year and go through the hell of being out of work maybe the week after your show got to town . . . and always and eternally fight—men! If you had, you'd understand why I snatch at anything to get out of it. Why, Gretchen, I've been on the stage since I was ten years old! Think of it! Nothing but a kid when I began. Do you wonder that I'm sick of it?"

"No, I don't wonder."

"And now I've found someone who can give me the sort of life I want—you can just bet I'll play my cards right to get it."

She laughed a little apologetically.

"I don't often throw a fit like this—let's talk about something pleasant!"

One morning a few days later I found an advertisement in the morning paper that caused all my hopes to flare up again. It was in the "Help Wanted" column, and read:

"Motion Picture: Young ladies wanted to act for new

motion picture company. Just organized. Big opportunity. Write Z118."

I omitted my customary visits to the studios and went home to compose a reply.

Two hours went by while I tore up one draft after another. Finally, I produced a letter that satisfied me as being diplomatic and intriguing. I posted it immediately and went around for the next few days with a feeling of being on the eve of great events.

It was four days after the posting of the letter that a reply came.

It was a scant three lines requesting me to report to a given address the next afternoon.

I read the instructions with such a feeling of joy in my heart that I thought it would burst.

Perhaps rescue had come before it was too late!

VII

MR. GRIMBLE, president of the Unlimited Film Producing Company, was middle-aged, short and very fat. His fat was of a gelatinous quality. It hung about him in great sagging rolls that vibrated tremulously at the slightest motion.

It is now over four years since I last saw him, but I remember with the vividness of a nightmare impression that quivering mass of flesh with blank little eyes sunk into it, like the currant eyes of a gingerbread man—the row of slightly discolored teeth at the bottom of which

showed a narrow piping of gold—and his walk, a strange sideways waddle.

When I was shown into his office, he was sitting by a desk littered with photographs and memoranda. From one corner of his mouth hung a black cigar, unlighted, at which he chewed absently, but with evident enjoyment.

As I entered, he hastily removed his coat from the only vacant chair in the office. I noticed that the great man wore sleeve supporters of pink elastic.

He heaved himself out of the swivel chair and advanced a few steps to meet me.

“Miss May?”

“Yes.”

“How d’ye do—Have a seat.”

I took the chair, cunningly placed so that I should face the light while he, observing me, could be in shadow. Apparently, this is considered an important strategic move by business men, so ready to seize upon any trick likely to give them an advantage, however slight, over the other fellow. Its childlike obliviousness always delights me.

Mr. Grimble sat down with a relieved sigh and rummaged among the litter before him.

He drew out a sheet of note paper, spread it on the desk and began reading to himself. It was my letter.

Suddenly he laughed, a short, barking sound that set his bulk to shaking alarmingly.

He turned and looked at me.

“That’s a good line of yours—‘it may be of advantage to both of us.’”

I smiled.

"Was it presumptuous of me to think that I might be of any advantage to a great film company?"

He appeared to consider.

"You're twenty—that's a little old, but you don't look a day over eighteen—"

His eyes swept up and down my figure.

For an instant they held an expression that affected me almost as an actual touch would have done. Then it blinked out. They became blank again.

"Yes," he said finally, as if to himself.

He went to the door of his office and spoke to the man outside.

I did not hear what he said, but presently my straining ears caught the sound of the outer door closing softly.

Mr. Grimble returned to his chair and leaned back luxuriously. Rummaging in a drawer of the desk, he drew out a box of matches and lighted the cigar which had remained in his mouth during most of our interview.

"Well, Miss May—" he began and then stopped abruptly.

"Yes," I encouraged him.

He deposited his cigar carefully in a tray containing the pulpy remains of its numerous predecessors, and leaned towards me.

"If you film well, I can make a star of you in six months—if you're a sensible girl."

"Oh, I'm a most sensible girl," I told him, understanding.

His glance searched my face.

"Good," he said at last. "What do you think of those?"

He pointed to the walls of the room which were covered by photographs of women.

"They're beautiful—may I look at them?"

"Surely!"

He accompanied me on my progress around the office, occasionally making a terse comment.

When we had completed the rounds, my morale was badly shaken. I thought that even the least beautiful of the pictured women was lovelier than I.

"Good lookers all right, eh?"

"They are—they most certainly are," I agreed wistfully.

Mr. Grimble leaned towards me and spoke in a confidential undertone.

"Not a virgin in the lot!"

"Is that so," I asked politely, because there didn't seem to be anything else to say.

"Surest thing in the world."

He held my glance for a long minute.

"No foolishness about those girls—they knew what they wanted, and no price was too big to pay for it. . . . Who in hell cares about your morals—after you've made good?" he demanded.

"I suppose you are quite right," I assented.

"You bet I'm right—and let me tell you one thing, the better you stand in with the big men, the less the little ones will bother you."

He pointed to a blonde beauty on the wall.

"See that girl? She didn't have any pull high up in her company and every dam' one of her pictures failed. Why? Because the camera man was down on her, and the lighting man was down on her, and every director was down on her. That's why. If she'd stood in with one of the *big* men, the others would of been afraid to try any monkey business. Now she's trying to get in with us for another try at it."

I realized that there was much the magazines had not told me.

"There's one thing about this company," Mr. Grimble went on. "It's not a bunch of dirty Jews—That's why they're all so crazy to get in. Why, do you know, they come here all day and beg me to take them on—offer themselves! They appreciate that it's a Christian crowd—And what's more, it never will be Jewish!"

I looked at him amazed. This monstrous, loathsome man honestly believed that he was more acceptable by virtue of being non-Jewish! I had never known many Jews, but any one of those I had met, even Mr. Lowenbein, was less repulsive to me than this mountain of quaking fat.

"I've taken a liking to you," Mr. Grimble said, looking to see if I registered the proper appreciation—"If you was to love me a little, I could look after your pictures, see that they went O. K. . . ."

"That's awfully good of you," I murmured helplessly.

It came over me suddenly that *this* was the price I was

required to pay. I had said that no sacrifice was too great. . . .

"What do you say," Mr. Grimble asked seductively after he had gazed at me in silence for a time.

"When you've made a star of me," I answered flatly.

"Oh, that's easy," he replied, elated. "Now, if you'll just slip off your dress, so I can get an idea of your weight. . . ."

He indicated a burlap screen in one corner of the office.

I wanted to laugh—to shriek wildly. This was too melodramatic to be taken seriously. It *couldn't* be happening.

I certainly did not want to appear in my underclothes before this man—not that I feared him, but that I shrank from the foolish indignity that he demanded. On the other hand, I was convinced of my ability to take care of myself; and I did not want to offend him at the outset.

I stepped behind the screen and presently emerged in petticoat and camisole.

Mr. Grimble waddled around me and gave vent to grunts of satisfaction.

"You'll do fine," he said at last. "Now give me a kiss!"

He stretched out his arms, but I eluded him and ran swiftly behind the screen.

"I don't pay in advance," I announced pertly, feverishly snapping on my dress.

He laughed his short bark.

"Oh, well, there'll be time enough for all that—eh?"

"Loads of time."

I was composed, impudent, smiling. No one would ever have guessed the sick loathing which I felt.

"Well, when shall I come for a try-out," I asked in business-like tones.

"Oh, you've had your try-out," he jested, resuming his seat at the desk. "Come to-morrow morning—not here, to the studio."

He gave me the address.

"Good-by," I cried, keeping at a safe distance.

"Good-by," he echoed, not rising.

At the door of the office, he stopped me.

"Do you know who you look like?" he asked.

I smiled.

"Oh, yes, I know—only too well!"

VIII

THE weeks that followed were busy ones. Mr. Grimble pronounced himself satisfied with my test pictures and almost immediately put me back to work in the new company's first production.

The only things which kept my happiness from being complete were the increasing amorousness of Mr. Grimble, and the fact that no contract had yet been signed.

"We'll start you on a salary of a hundred and fifty per, and when you're done with this picture, you and me can come together on the terms of a contract," he said with a suggestive leer.

Even I with my limited experience, realized that this was somewhat irregular, but I was too anxious for a start,

to make objections. Also, a hundred and fifty dollars a week seemed a great deal to me.

My days were spent in the big, hot studio behind the blinding lights. There were nights when we worked over scenes until twelve or one o'clock. It was body-breaking, soul-wearing, but I liked it.

There were inescapable interviews with the Unlimited's president that I came to dread more and more. He would send for me to come to his office—always late in the afternoon. Soon after I arrived, I would hear that soft closing of the outer door and know that the non-committal secretary had taken himself off—under orders.

However, beyond an occasional kiss, Mr. Grimble made no headway. I was adamant in my refusal to allow him any privileges until the contract with the company had been signed. His cajolery and sulking were alike ineffective. I was not afraid of his losing interest in me before I had become established, because all the signs pointed to the fact that this gargantuan creature desired me above everything else. It seemed to have become a ruling passion with him to break down my reserve—to force me to yield before the time when I had promised. Each time I left his office with the feeling of having obtained a short breathing space before another tremendous effort of will would be required of me. After each visit to him, I plunged into work more desperately than ever.

One day the picture was held up for lack of certain costumes which had not been completed, so I had a holiday. That evening I thought regretfully of Alicia. It

had been ages since I saw her. After dinner I caught a 'bus and went down to the funny little street where she lived on the off-chance of finding her in.

Alicia had a room and kitchenette in an old-fashioned brownstone house. I rang the bell, walked up the two dark flights to her quarters and rapped at the door.

There were frantic sounds within—running back and forth—the slamming of bureau drawers—the scraping of chairs.

I knocked again.

"Just one minute," she cried breathlessly.

There was a moment's quiet. I could imagine Alicia standing before her mirror, scrutinizing intently her olive skin, giving it a final brush of powder, smoothing her black hair into a gleaming, satiny surface. She was evidently expecting a caller.

"Oh, you wicked girl to make me rush so," she cried as she opened the door and caught sight of me.

"Aren't you glad to see me?"

"Of course! But I thought you were—someone else . . ."

The slight embarrassment of her manner gave place to intense nervousness as she pushed me into a chair and leaned over me.

"I've an idea, Gretchen, that to-night will decide," she cried excitedly.

"What . . .?"

"*He's* coming."

"Who—the up-state suitor?"

"Yes, and oh, Gretchen, he's been spending money lately

like water . . . it's a good sign, because before he's never parted with a nickel that he didn't actually have to. Why, honestly, in restaurants sometimes I've felt like apologizing to the waiters for the measley little tips he's given them. And now! Well, the sky's the limit!"

"I'm awfully glad, dear—if you're happy."

"I am," she asserted stoutly. "When I think of never having to worry about getting work, or about rehearsals, or bad-tempered directors—oh, Gretchen! A home in the country with trees and bushels of flowers—it seems almost too good to be true!"

"Well, dear, just be sure that you'll get all that," I said pessimistically, remembering my "home in the country."

"Tell me about yourself," Alicia commanded, rising to switch on a shaded light by her bureau. "Is the new job as marvelous as you expected?"

"It's frightfully hard work—and there're features I don't like . . ."

"Men," she asked, eyeing me shrewdly.

I nodded briefly.

"Man."

"There always is," she commented, her expression becoming wearily bitter. "If you stay at home, they have the upper hand, and if you work, it's the same—until you've made good. But by that time the damage has been done. . . . They're starring you, aren't they?"

"Yes."

"I haven't worked for over a month," Alicia said slowly.

"Why don't you go around to see Mr. Grimble, there's always something, it seems to me. I'll speak to him, if you like."

"Thanks, I'll do that, if *this* falls through," she agreed.

There was a long peal of the bell.

"There he is now," Alicia cried, jumping up with a return of her nervous excitement and hurrying to the release which she pressed feverishly.

"He doesn't like to be kept waiting," she explained. "We're going to a show."

I rose hastily to leave.

"Why don't you wait and meet him—we'll drop you at your place?"

"No, I'd better go now . . ."

I took both her slim, brown hands and leaned down to kiss her. Alicia was very small. She clung to me for a moment.

"You're very sweet, Gretchen," she said tremulously.

"And so are you," I replied, looking deep into her wistful eyes. "I hope you'll get what you want—everything you want—Alicia."

My final glimpse of her was of a lithe, flame-colored figure flying to the mirror for a last careful inspection of itself.

As I reached the head of the stairs, Alicia's caller was mounting the last few steps. I leaned back against the wall, for a second too stunned and ill to move. As he caught sight of me, he started, and a look of shame, quickly banished, appeared on his white, furtive face.

The tall figure in immaculate black clothes was Herman May.

"Good evening, father," I said softly, maliciously. "Somehow I never thought of you as a Don Juan!"

He stared at me coldly, without recognition—sidled up the hall and rapped on Alicia's door.

IX

I HAD heard nothing from Mr. Grimble for a long while when one morning he rang me at the studio and asked to see me that afternoon. As always, I was to come to his office for the interview.

"I've a surprise for you, girlie," he said.

I wondered what the surprise could be. Prepared as I was for anything, I rather doubted that Mr. Grimble could surprise me. Still, my habitual trepidation was tinged with mild curiosity as I left the elevator and walked down the long hall to the Unlimited's office. The outer office was deserted and I had to knock twice on the door to the president's sanctum before his short "come in" invited me to enter.

Since my first visit, six weeks before, the place had undergone radical changes. New furniture throughout, of luxurious mahogany, thick rugs, settees and chairs upholstered in leather changed the bare, temporary appearance of the rooms into a look of solid prosperousness.

Mr. Grimble sat at his desk reading a legal-looking document. He did not rise when I came in, but motioned

to a chair and immediately plunged back into his absorption.

I leaned back in the comfortable chair, grateful for a few moment's relaxation after my long day at the studio. Within another week the picture would be finished, if all went well—and every member of the cast was working overtime.

For perhaps five minutes Mr. Grimble remained oblivious of my presence. Then he gave vent to a satisfied exclamation.

"Well, what do you think of that," he asked, tossing the document in my lap and eyeing me closely.

It was a contract.

"All it needs to make it water-tight is your name," he told me. "Read it over."

I glanced through the closely written paragraphs wherein I promised to act exclusively for The Unlimited Film Producing Company for the next three years at a salary of eight thousand dollars a year, giving them an option on the next three years of my life. Again I went through the maze of "party of the first part" and "party of the second part"—this time more carefully. Then I laid the contract on Mr. Grimble's desk and smiled at him.

"How does it strike you?" he asked, beaming.

"All right—you're not getting the worst of it by any manner of means, but it's the best thing in sight for me."

"Well, you know we discovered you—and are training you. That gives us the right to some advantage, don't it?"

"Oh, yes."

"And the next contract will more'n likely call for a salary of eighty thousand per, if you make good," he continued jocularly. "International's in a hell of a stew because we got you to work for us. They got wind of it somehow, and Montrose has raised a rough-house. They've been trying to buy us off—get us to can you, see? But that's where I come in. I told 'em to go chase themselves—that you'd have Montrose beat in a year. But," he tapped the contract suggestively, "I thought we might as well get things cinched without losing any more time."

"Oh, that—that awful woman," I cried, angrily tearful.

"Who—Montrose? Sure," he agreed cheerfully. "But you can't blame her. She's a goner, if you get going."

He leaned forward and took my hands, drawing me towards him.

"And I'll see that you do get going, if you're good to me."

I let him pull me on his knees, endured his long kisses passively, but when his pudgy hand moved down my throat to my breast, instinctive modesty made me draw back sharply.

"Don't," I cried.

"Don't," he echoed, surprised, "you ain't going to keep on putting me off, are you?"

He tapped the contract on his desk.

"This shows that I've got faith in you—now you got to show your faith in me."

The telephone rang, stridently—insistently.

"Oh, damn the damn thing," Mr. Grimble cursed fer-

vently when it could no longer be ignored. He jerked down the receiver and barked a "hello."

I seized the opportunity to slip from his lap, back into my chair.

From his remarks I could get no idea of the conversation, but I saw that he was seriously annoyed.

"Yes."

"Yes."

"Can't it wait?"

"Well—all right, but right away, and make it snappy."

He turned from the instrument, a scowl on his heavy features.

"Some idiot's got to see me on important business this afternoon. I told him to come right up."

I rose, scarcely bothering to conceal my relief.

"Then, I'll leave you."

"Wait a minute," he ordered, "I want you to come back in about forty minutes."

He consulted his watch.

"It's a quarter of six now—you come back at six-thirty. I'll get rid of this fellow before then; there're a lot of things we've got to get settled."

I realized that he meant to demand payment—that I could temporize no longer. My despair was the greater because I knew that always I had hoped to make myself so valuable to the company that he would give me a chance regardless of whether I kept my promise or no. This was not true. There were many potential stars who were willing to give what he asked of me—He desired me, but I was not indispensable. I knew as well as if he had told

me that I should not be allowed to sign my name on the dotted line of that contract until he had possessed me. However, in spite of my loathing aversion it never occurred to me to retreat. After all, my chastity had never earned one meal, nor a night's lodging, nor peace of mind for me. Not moral scruples, but fastidiousness, held me back. My ambition, and the spur of Madeline Montrose's "rough house" urged me on. Too much was at stake for me to weaken now.

"I'll be back at six-thirty," I said tonelessly.

"Good!"

There was but one thought in my mind as I left the building; to find some one who would accompany me back to the Unlimited's offices. I had an almost morbid fear of going alone. Not that I thought company would change the issue in any way, but that I feared to be in that deserted building with only Mr. Grimble.

Even now, I can not find a satisfactory explanation of my mood. Unless it was due to that innate caution of mine which I have never quite outlived—an inability to trust any one completely. At least, he could not murder me conveniently with a third person within calling distance!

I stood on the sidewalk and thought desperately for a moment. There was no one to whom I could appeal. Alicia—but I had not seen her since the night I surprised my father at her door. I had rung the next morning to tell her the truth about him, but her landlady informed me that Miss Cary had gone without leaving an address. Poor Alicia! I could not believe that Herman May had

endangered his church and social connections by bringing home an unknown actress as his wife.

Friendships in New York are like fascinating serial stories into which one dips for a few chapters without knowing what has gone before, and most often without discovering the end.

I had known a number of people since leaving home, but none so intimately that I could call on them now. Miss Martin would come and gladly—but how could I explain my action to her, even if she were able to leave the office . . .

The thought of Miss Martin recalled to me a remark of hers about the hotel at which we had lunched together.

“It’s an awful place for pick-ups,” she had said.

Without any definite idea, I started walking the six blocks to the hotel. It was as good a place to wait as any.

I selected a chair in the big, ornate lobby and sat indifferently watching the stream of people that flowed in and out.

Soon I had the feeling of being watched. I turned imperceptibly and caught the intent gaze of a youngish-looking man in a chair near my own. Miss Martin had been right.

I did not know the technique of pick-ups, but I knew that this man wanted to speak to me. Had I been better versed in the science, I should have encouraged him. As it was, I turned back quickly, overcome with shyness, and fixed my eyes on the clock. He did not cease staring.

At a quarter past six, I rose, unable to endure the mesmeric pull of those eyes any longer and left the hotel.

He passed me on the steps—walked slowly ahead of me down the street—turned at the corner and smiled.

Without my volition, I smiled too, and extended my hand.

“How do you do,” I asked cordially.

“Fine, how are you?”

It might have been a chance meeting of old friends. He fell into step beside me.

“I’m awfully lonely,” he said. “Will you have dinner with me to-night?”

“If you will go with me first to an appointment I have—I warn you, it may take quite a while.”

“Time’s nothing to me,” he replied easily.

“I tell you what,” I suggested, made awkward by my nervousness, as we reached the looming pile of brick where Mr. Grimble awaited me. “Suppose you wait for half an hour in the drug-store on the ground floor here, and then, if I haven’t come, walk up to the second floor (the elevator’s stopped running) and knock on the door at the end of the hall—just to remind me.”

He raised his eyebrows a trifle. Indeed, it sounded as if I were involved in some desperate, detective plot. Then he smiled.

“I’ll do it,” he agreed.

“Thank you Mr. . . .”

“My name’s Archer.”

Mr. Grimble was waiting for me in his office. As he sat there on the leather upholstered sofa, he looked like an old heathen idol with his blank little eyes and immobile face.

He greeted me fatuously.

"Come, sit down," he urged, patting the settee invitingly.

I gingerly took the place indicated.

"Love me a little?" he asked.

"Lots," I smiled courageously.

"Fine—and you won't regret it either."

He encircled me with his gigantic arms—showered slow kisses on my lips and throat—pressed me back, his strong mouth against mine.

I seemed to hear Jake's voice crying sorrowfully:

"Guinevere, oh, Guinevere!"

Then everything was blotted out in a riot of starved senses.

X

ONE may prefer caviar to cabbage—one's fastidious mind may abhor the spectacle of cabbage eating, but one's lusty, expedient body is not revolted by cabbage, if there is nothing else.

As I smoothed my hair before the little mirror in Mr. Grimble's office, I told myself that I was a fallen woman—told myself solemnly two or three times. But the words carried no conviction. I did not feel sinful. I felt not at all different except for an indescribably vivid glow of well-being.

The image of a prism such as one sees on chandeliers came into my mind. I felt much as a prism looks—sparkling, colorful, intense.

But returning to cabbage after one is satisfied is another matter. Mr. Grumble told me goodby with extravagant protestations of love to which I scarcely listened, so intent was I on getting away. He murmured something about finding an apartment for me at once. I acquiesced, as I would have acquiesced to a suggestion that I dine exclusively on humming birds' tongues in the future. Anything to get rid of him!

I closed the office door behind me. As I did so, I caught sight of Mr. Archer coming down the hall.

I had forgotten all about him.

As we met, he bent down swiftly to kiss me.

"What do you mean?" I asked, drawing back furiously. "If you're expecting anything like that from me, I may as well tell you now that you'll be disappointed. You picked me up—I picked you up—we're equally to blame. I'm willing to have dinner with you . . . I'll try to be an amusing companion during the meal. But that's as far as it goes—understand?"

"God knows I'm willing," Mr. Archer said gloomily. "I was only trying to do what is usually expected."

"I appreciate your thoughtfulness," I told him snapishly, "but it's quite mistaken in this case."

He smiled suddenly—a flashing smile that illumined and gave exceptional charm to his dark face.

"Good heavens, we're already quarreling like lovers."

I made no answer as we walked to the street in profound silence.

"How about Sherry's," he suggested.

I had never been there. He looked his surprise and signaled a passing taxi.

Before my engagement with The Unlimited, I could not afford to patronize expensive restaurants. Afterwards, I was usually too tired to care where I ate, or what. The dairy lunch near my lodgings served well enough.

My companion was about thirty-five, slender and immaculately dressed. He was dark and un-American looking (I later learned that his mother was a Polish woman) with a peculiarly melancholy cast of features.

Mr. Archer, if he possessed no other virtues, knew how to order a dinner.

He seemed familiar with the place—the headwaiter called him by name which impressed me mightily—and all its resources.

In a miraculously short time, we had the first course before us. Mr. Archer spoke to the waiter in an aside, the latter nodded and darted away to reappear with a bottle packed in ice.

“Champagne’s the only thing I can imagine you drinking,” Mr. Archer said to me, “it fits you somehow as nothing else would—except perhaps crème de menthe or benedictine—and they’re a little—heavy.”

The picture of a moonlit beach sprang up before me—Jake triumphantly bringing forth a long-necked bottle—our kiss by the lake. . . . A sudden thought stabbed me. I had killed Jake because of his one innocent indiscretion—I!

My face must have been quite white as I refused.

“No, thank you—I won’t drink.”

"Oh, please, just a little one . . .?"

"None, if you don't mind."

Mr. Archer looked at me curiously.

"What are you?" he asked. "I mean, what do you do?"

"Can't we just be ourselves without any backgrounds at all?" I begged. "I don't want to know about you, and I'd rather not talk about myself. We are wanderers who have come together for an hour to forget our loneliness. . . . Can't it be that way?"

"You pique me," he said slowly. "You meet me in a highly unconventional manner—you've the eyes of a schoolgirl—and you won't drink, even champagne. What are you called, innocent adventuress?"

"They call me Gretchen, sir."

"Gretchen," he mused, "it suits one part of your personality—my name is DuVal, after my father whom I resemble in nothing else."

"It's a very—picturesque name."

"He was not a very picturesque person. But my mother—Gretchen, you would have loved my mother."

"Is she——?"

"Yes, when I was sixteen."

"Mother died when I was sixteen."

"And did you start being lonely then as I did?"

"No—I didn't like her very much."

He looked shocked for a moment and then his brilliant smile appeared. As long as I knew DuVal, I never heard him laugh more than two or three times, but he smiled frequently—at first.

"It looks as if you're by way of being a new type, Gretchen. I thought I'd known almost every kind of woman, but apparently my boasted knowledge of them has been as unfounded as that of disillusioned puppy-love. Are you to be trusted, Gretchen?" he ended with inexplicable intentness.

"I don't know," I replied after thinking a minute.

Archer clapped his hands delightedly.

"She doesn't know! That means you are an honest woman, at least.—I haven't believed there were any honest women since—since my wife left me three years ago."

"Why did she leave you, DuVal?"

He shrugged his shoulders and a look of gleaming hate routed the melancholy in his eyes.

"For another man—a regular chorus boy! Pink cheeked, blue eyed, cherubic—unforgivably collegy."

We were talking with the unrestraint of complete strangers who never have to see each other again, unless they wish.

"I divorced her, of course."

"My lover died," I told him impulsively. "Killed in an automobile accident—in fact, I killed him. He'd been drinking and I sent him away, so you see, I was really to blame for his death."

It was the first time I had voiced that haunting thought to any one. The words brought a strange relief to me, as if my admission of guilt, my insistence on this point, had in some obscure way atoned.

My companion reached across the table and pressed my hands convulsively. He seemed deeply moved. His

expressive face had taken on a look of pitying sadness. I was surprised to see that his eyes were wet with tears.

"You poor child—Don't talk so. How could you know?"

He took out a handkerchief and wiped his eyes with no sign of the average man's agony on being detected in tears.

We finished dinner in a subdued mood.

Mr. Archer called for the check and protested heatedly when I insisted on paying half.

"But why? It was I who invited you to dinner."

"Please," I begged. "Don't you see how I feel? You needn't worry about my doing it. . . . I've plenty of money."

He gave in finally, but on the condition that I should be his guest some evening very soon.

On the street I said good-by.

"Do you think I'd let you go home alone—at this hour," he asked in astonishment.

I laughed. It was not yet half-past nine.

"If you knew the hours at which I have gone home alone," I began.

He looked at me sharply.

"What?"

"You're evidently not accustomed to associate with independent working women," I said lightly.

"No, I'm not," he agreed. "And I never would get used to it. It's not right!"

"But often necessary," I suggested.

"I'm not so sure of that," he persisted stubbornly.

In spite of my pleas, he called a cab and accompanied me to my door.

We paused for a moment on the steps.

"Thank you, Gretchen—for everything, but most of all for being yourself, when most people are preoccupied with being almost anything else."

"You've nothing to thank me for," I said. "It's I who should thank you . . ."

"To-morrow evening," he asked.

"No. I shall be very busy to-morrow."

"Then, Thursday?"

"Do you think it's best," I parried; "can anything come of a friendship begun in this way?"

"Don't you know that I don't misunderstand you," he asked. "There are many things that I don't understand, but I know (it's an over-worked word) that you are a lady—the rest doesn't matter greatly. Say that you will let me see you Thursday—I'm very lonely, Gretchen!"

"Well—goodby till Thursday, then—if you're sure . . .?"

"I am."

He bowed over my hand, went swiftly down the steps and climbed into the waiting cab.

I mounted the stairs to my second story room (when my period of prosperity began, I had moved from the closet under the eaves) and switched on the light.

As I did so, a thought occurred that caused me to burst into a gale of hysterical laughter.

I had left Mr. Grimble's office without remembering to sign the contract.

XI

THIS ironic fact was now my greatest asset. For after my experience with Mr. Grimble I knew that I could not accept his conditions. Of the shame, regrets and self-reproaches with which most girls in my position would have tortured themselves, I felt not a trace.

For all our differences, the blood of Herman May beat strongly in my veins, as my attitude on this occasion showed. Nothing remained of my mother's weak, sentimental, moralizing nature, so far as I could tell. Her inhibitions had power over me for the last time that night when I sent Jake Frazer to his death.

Father always knew what he wanted, and would accept any terms, moral or otherwise, which enabled him to get it. Afterwards, if he found he'd the worst end of the bargain,—well, he didn't waste time in fretful squealings.

Nor did I now.

It was not a thing to be reasoned about—something deep and fundamental forbade me to return. I meant never to return. If I could avoid it, I would never look on that mask-like face, those blank eyes, and the hideous gold piped teeth again. I took keen pleasure in imagining Mr. Grimble's consternation when he discovered that I had abandoned him a week before the picture was due to be finished. For once, he had overreached himself in scheming for his own advantage. I was not bound in any way—indeed, I had worked two days for which I did not intend to claim payment. I, perhaps the most gullible of all his dupes, would get the best of him at last.

Towards Mr. Grimble himself, I felt no particular animosity . . . it was divinely right that the driver of hard bargains should be worsted, that was all.

My most vindictive wish was that he might have a steady stream of beautiful and ambitious young women passing through his office. Fate would take care of the rest. Mr. Grimble was not a young man.

Before I went to bed I wrote a note to him in which I said that I could not continue to act for the Unlimited and requested him to make no effort to get in touch with me.

To make assurance doubly sure, I informed my landlady that I had been called out of town and had no idea when I should return.

Next morning I paid her an extra week's rent and set out to find new lodgings.

This was not difficult as the autumn apartment hunting had not yet begun in earnest. With the morning paper to guide me, I soon found a comfortable room in the upper thirties at a rate that was not too exorbitant. I returned for my steamer trunk and suitcases, and was settled in my new home before eleven o'clock.

Again I was adrift, without plans or work or friends. Yet for the first time in weeks I felt that I could call my soul my own.

It was with regret that I remembered DuVal Archer. There was no way by which I could let him know of my new address except by leaving it with my former landlady. This, I did not dare to do. Mr. Grimble, I knew, would resort to any means to discover my where-

abouts, and I feared that her morals were not sufficiently well-grounded to resist a bribe. Perhaps it was best so. Mr. Archer was connected even if indirectly with a phase of my life which I wanted to forget completely.

All day I sat in my room, reading and thinking—content to bask in the knowledge of my freedom. That night I went to bed at nine o'clock to fall immediately into a deep, child-like sleep.

XII

THE weeks that followed resembled in every particular those weeks that had preceded my engagement by Mr. Grimble.

The daily round of the studios—the scrimping meals—the worry about money had begun again.

My clothes for "The Rose of Arcady" had eaten up a good third of the salary I received, so that I found myself at the time I left not very much better off financially than I had been when I resigned my position at the office on the strength of the International's encouragement.

A few stunning gowns, a few hundred dollars in cash, and a great deal of experience, constituted my assets.

I was older, warier, tried—but still hoping for a miracle. It was this faith in to-morrow which kept me from despairing even when things looked blackest.

The idea of going back to an office never once presented itself to me as a way out. Nor does it surprise me now that this possibility was eliminated from my calculations.

My year as a billing clerk bred in me such a repugnance

to business that I can hardly bear to enter an office to this day.

As I look back now to that time, I wonder that the thought of suicide did not occur to me as I faced discouragement day after day—watching my money trickle through my fingers with no prospect of earning more.

Perhaps my bodily health made such an alternative seem unthinkable, but I am inclined to believe that it was my unconscious reliance on some improbable, last minute solution of my difficulties which kept me doggedly hopeful.

XIII

My resources were very low indeed when I finally obtained work.

"Anything to-day," I asked, walking into the casting director's office at one of the larger studios.

"How tall are you," he shot out without preliminaries.

"Five feet, three inches," I answered hopefully.

"Come in to-morrow at ten."

That was all; yet it meant that I was for the time being released from the gnawing anxiety which had been my companion for longer than I cared to remember. My mercurial spirits soared into confident, lofty spaces—I should make good yet by my own efforts!

Indescribably elated, I went out and ordered a huge lunch, with beefsteak.

But that night, remembering the International, a qualm of uneasiness smote me, and I confined my dinner to a glass of milk and a bun.

Next morning I found five other girls of my own height assembled in the office when I arrived.

"We want you for a bit in the new Eglamore picture," the director told us. "It will be shot at the 53rd Street studio. You'd better hurry down there. Costumes will be furnished you. . . . Seven-fifty is the pay."

It was not very promising. Still, a day's work would almost pay my room rent for one week—and an engagement was an engagement!

We filed out the office and boarded a surface car at the corner.

The other girls seemed to know each other. They talked and laughed and exchanged grievances in the friendliest manner. But I was an outsider. I must confess to a snobbish feeling of shame at being in their company. It was not only that I was better dressed—there was a subtle lack of refinement in them that repelled me. It is probable that they felt my unspoken criticism and were even louder and more buoyant than usual to show their defiance of it.

We found only a pale, long haired boy at the studio. One of the girls, a slender creature with a mass of black bobbed hair, addressed him pertly and told our errand.

"Richardson's directing—and he hasn't showed up yet," the youth replied indifferently. "You can wait."

We sat down on stiff chairs against the wall and waited. We waited for two and a half hours.

At the end of that time the boy appeared and languidly informed us that Richardson had telephoned. There had

been a hitch about costumes—and we were to report the next day at the 133rd St. studio at ten o'clock.

"Well, say, we get paid for to-day, don't we?" the bobbed haired girl asked belligerently.

The boy shrugged.

"Search me—I ain't bossin' the lot."

Our experience at the 133rd St. studio differed in no respect from that of the day before, except that we waited four hours.

Mr. Richardson, it seemed, could not be present to direct us. We were to report next day at the same time.

But the next morning, life began to look considerably rosier. We were assigned almost immediately to a great dressing room and told to make up.

Then our costumes were brought—red woolen tights with feet attached and a cap with stuffed points on top to represent horns.

The garments fitted like wax. The woolen cloth scratched unbearably, but we were too overjoyed at the end of our long waiting to complain of such minor inconveniences.

Painfully encased, we sat in the dressing room awaiting our call before the camera.

One of the girls pored intently over a paper-bound book, her lips visibly forming each word as she read. The rest of us drooped on the stiff backed chairs and talked fitfully.

"Ever been on the legit'," the bobbed hair girl asked me suddenly.

"No, only the pictures—and that for just a short while."

"Nothing like the footlights," she told me. "My husband and I do a vaudeville act. It's a riot—brings down the house every time. When we're not working, I do this." She indicated her makeup with a scornful gesture.

"It's not so bad, though," she defended, "there's always a chance that some director'll lamp you and give you a real job—and meantime, it's good money."

"Have you been acting long?" I asked her in an effort at friendliness.

"So long I can't remember when I began—When I first started in pictures, a director told me that, if I was three inches taller, I'd be a perfect vamp type. . . . I ask you, ain't it tough luck? All that stands between me and big money is three inches!"

She laughed ruefully.

A great sympathy trembled within me. The memory of my previous snobbishness hurt like an insult. Any one of these girls was better than I, because they made no claim to superiority.

The room with its long line of mirrors over which blazed the electric lights in their wire cages—we six fantastic figures, two-toned, scarlet and yellow, took on a significance beyond the surface significance. The disharmonies resolved themselves into clear tone.

The girl whose lack of three inches kept her from big money—I whose obstacle was no less real than hers because of being intangible—the girl whose scarlet horns jutted grotesquely over the book she read—the three other

figures, pallid with paint, were all caught together in a swirl of cosmic intention. It all meant something. . . . What did it mean? I almost saw the underlying unity that bound the splinters of our personalities into a perfect whole. For an instant I sensed the purpose of life. I had the feeling one experiences sometimes in dreams—of being on the verge of a revelation that would lay bare the innermost heart of everything.

Then it went.

"You look like you're seeing ghosts," the bobbed haired girl exclaimed.

I looked up to find her watching me intently. At her words, the girl who read glanced at me curiously over the top of her book.

"Maybe I am," I smiled. "All of us—ghosts!"

"No ghost ever itched like me," she retorted to a faint burst of laughter from the others. She pulled at the thick woolen stuff of her tights in an effort to ease the imprisoned flesh beneath.

The morning dragged itself away.

At half-past twelve sandwiches and coffee were brought to us from the cafeteria in the building.

At two we were called.

Before a narrow, raised platform at one end of the studio, a knot of men stood talking.

As we entered, one of them separated himself from the group and came over to us. It was the director.

"Do you know, girls," he began, and then stopped short as he caught sight of me.

"What's your name?" he asked.

At his words an instantaneous tension made itself felt among my companions. They seemed to draw together—hostile—against me.

I told him.

He nodded.

"That so? I thought for a second—you look an awful lot like Madeline Montrose," he ended conversationally.

The tension relaxed.

"There's been a silly mistake made, girls," Mr. Richardson continued. "Your costumes shouldn't be red. It won't photograph right. We'll have to get some other color. I'm afraid it's too late to fix it up to-day. But we can rehearse your scene and then to-morrow it won't take but a few minutes to get through with it."

We nodded amiably in spite of our disappointment. Mr. Richardson was the sort of director for whom one worked till one dropped.

"Just climb up there," he went on, indicating the high platform. "You're supposed to be devils—dancing—tempting a man. Now let's see what sort of dance you can do."

For perhaps half an hour we gyrated nervously on the narrow stage before Mr. Richardson pronounced himself satisfied, and dismissed us.

As I rubbed cold cream into my chafed skin that night, I thought that seven-fifty a day was none too much for what we were required to do. Still, as the bobbed-haired girl had phrased it, there was always a chance that some director would "lamp" you and become interested.

I knew that I filmed well—I knew that I did not act

badly. I should do my part in the devil's dance as if it were a leading rôle—Perhaps . . .

I went to sleep speculating on the possibilities that might ensue.

Mr. Richardson was right.

Attired in our new costumes, which were sulphur colored and boasted long tails as well as horns, we danced frantically for fifteen minutes. Then he nodded to the camera man and told us to stop.

"Fine," he cheered enthusiastically, as if he had just finished a tremendous emotional scene.

"Fine—Now get dressed and bring your costumes down to the 59th Street place. I'll be waiting there and will see that you get credit for full time."

Thirty minutes later, each with bundle and make-up box, we checked in our costumes at the 59th Street studio. Mr. Richardson accompanied us to the wardrobe room.

As we entered, a tired looking woman glanced up.

"Were they all right?" she asked eagerly. "We sat up half the night to get them made—there wasn't any yellow ones in stock."

Mr. Richardson stopped and chatted with her. "They were fine. It's to be a dance of the devils—just imaginary, you know," he said. "The little devils are tempting a man—they dance across his desk—just little things, you know—reduced to five inches high. These girls did fine at it!"

"Five inches high!"

Then no one would ever know any of us. I thought of

the care with which I had made up and danced—of the long waits—the sting of the wretched garments.

Suddenly I leaned against the wall and gave way to laughter that rose and fell in shrill cadences—laughter strangely intermingled with tears.

Mr. Richardson tried to comfort me. But he had no idea of what was the matter.

I became ashamed of myself, struggled to quiet my sobs—looked up and laughed determinedly.

“It was so funny,” I said, “to think of being reduced to five inches.”

He patted my shoulder and laughed uncertainly.

“Yes, it is funny, isn’t it?”

As we went down the steep, dark stairway to the cashier’s office, I was discouraged, completely disillusioned by the futility of the whole thing.

I was done with motion pictures, and, oddly enough, it was Mr. Richardson rather than Mr. Grimble who had brought me to my present state of mind.

I folded the crisp bills, my three and a half days’ pay, and placed them in my purse, vowing that I would not enter a studio again.

As I reached the hall on my way out, a man was standing by the door, looking unspeakably dejected.

It was DuVal Archer.

When he saw me his face lighted wonderfully. He ran forward and caught both my hands in a crushing grip.

“Gretchen—Gretchen,” he cried, “if you only knew how I’ve looked for you everywhere!”

XIV

"You've been crying, Gretchen—and you're thin. What have they done to you," DuVal asked as we went down the street together.

The joyous security of being with him—of knowing there was one person who cared, enabled me to jest.

"They reduced me to five inches," I replied lightly.

"Did what," he exclaimed in such consternation that for a moment I could only laugh at him.

Then I explained the dance of the devils.

"It's a crime—you in tights before all those beastly men! Don't do it again, Gretchen—you're made for something better!"

"I rather think I shan't," I told him slowly, "though not altogether because of the tights."

We walked into the park, as if by mutual consent, and sat down on a green bench by the driveway.

"How did you know I was in pictures?" I wondered.

DuVal looked slightly embarrassed.

"You remember the day I met you? . . . When your landlady told me you had left town, I couldn't believe it. . . . I went back to that place where you'd told me to come, if you hadn't appeared in half an hour. There was a man in——" He hesitated for a moment. "He said you'd turned down their contract and disappeared—he was huffy as the devil about it—Why did you turn down their contract, Gretchen?" DuVal asked, looking at me with the fiery intensity so characteristic of him.

For some reason, I did not resent his questioning. It

was right that he who had helped me twice should know what he wished about me.

"I couldn't accept their conditions——"

"I knew it! —So then I went every day to the studios looking for you—How long has it been since we met——? Six weeks? . . . Well, every day I've gone to some of them, trying to find you. (God, what places! How do you stand it?) To-day, I was just on the point of giving it up as a bad job when you came into the hall there. I don't think I'd realized until then what finding you meant to me. . . ."

"I'm glad you came. . . . I was pretty sick of it . . . there was no one to talk to. . . . I don't know what I might have done if you hadn't come," I said.

We sat silent looking out over the wide stretch of grass before us. The trees stood motionless and massed, like the trees in paintings. Pale sunlight glinted through their branches,—cast lace-like patterns of shadow on the turf. Why were shadows always black, I wondered idly. The leaves were red and gold.

"There was something about you, Gretchen," DuVal broke the long silence, "that I'd never seen before—your honesty that is like a shining armor—your loneliness—your beauty. . . . When I left you that night, I thought I might come to love you. When I found you had gone (why did you go?), I knew that I'd loved you from the first.—We are both lonely—marry me, dear girl, and let's be lonely together," he finished whimsically.

I was so tired, so heartsick. I had so long struggled alone. This man's words were like an opiate, soothing—

bringing forgetfulness. It was so easy, fatally easy, to slip out of my pain in this way. Marriage? I had no illusions about marriage, but at its worst, was it less desirable than my present fighting, worrying, uncertain existence? There was a part of me that said: "Go on! Keep fighting!" But what chance had it against my tired body and mind's longing for peace?

"You don't know a thing about me," I said.

"I know enough."

"There are things you should know . . ."

"I don't want to know anything—I want you."

"I have no money, nor family, nor friends . . ."

"You are all I want—I tell you, Gretchen," he cried vehemently, "you've entered into my very blood! I need you, and I must have you. I can't be reasonable. I know I'm insane—drunk with you—but I can't help it—I don't want to help it!"

. . . Now, breathe deeply—that's it! Now again . . . You're going to sleep, Gretchen. You're going to sleep. . . . So easy! . . .

BOOK FOUR

I

WE were married at the Little Church Around the Corner. Afterwards, DuVal took me to Atlantic City for a week while his house was being put in order.

At the time of his first marriage, he had bought a place in the Westchester hills near Mount Vernon where he had continued to live since his divorce, keeping indifferent bachelor's quarters.

I wanted to go there at once, but DuVal would not hear of it.

"I wouldn't for the world," he refused. "Jemmett has orders to get a woman in and have everything in apple pie order by Saturday. I want your homecoming to be as nearly perfect as possible, sweetheart!"

No one had ever called me sweetheart but Jake—at the word I flinched and drew back ever so slightly from my husband's arms.

DuVal employed love words constantly, and sometimes teased me because of my undemonstrativeness.

"I love you, too," he would mimic my diffident declaration. "Is *that* all you have to say to me?"

From the day I had promised to marry him, I moved as one in a trance.

The challenging words of the clergyman dropped upon

my consciousness from a great distance. They were meaningless—unreal. My husband's passionate love-making, our week of luxurious idling by the sea were unreal—and I, the unrealest thing of all.

I accepted everything unquestioningly as one does when coming out of a long illness. I smiled on the world and found it good, though, as yet, I seemed to have no vital connection with it.

DuVal scolded me indulgently because of my passiveness, but he was not really concerned. He attributed it to the shyness of the unawakened schoolgirl that he persisted in thinking me. But I was not a schoolgirl, I was a woman—redblooded, throbbing with unsatisfied desire.

For DuVal I felt only a great tenderness and gratitude. His kisses left me unstirred, smilingly receptive.

I rather think that he was too epicurean, over-refined. The sharp edge was gone from his appetite which could now be stimulated only by the new and the piquant. While I was—well, an untutored barbarian.

I went through the week dreamily, sunk in a not unpleasant, coma-like state. It was only on Saturday when I saw my home for the first time that I awoke to something akin to realization.

The house was of grey stucco, redroofed, with casement windows. It stood in the exact center of a close-clipped lawn, unbroken by shrubs or flower beds.

From the wide steps, a paved walk led down to the street.

"Oh," I cried almost fearfully, as DuVal helped me from the car, "aren't there any trees?"

He smiled at me proudly, possessively.

"Yes, indeed, in the back yard," he reassured me.

"Oh," I cried again, relieved.

II

My household consisted of four persons: DuVal and me, Jemmett, the negro man who cleaned and butlered, and Emmy, the cook, a preposterously fat Irish woman with a round, red face like the full moon, a little upturned nose, and a tongue that never ceased except when her head was buried in the big stew-pan of tea which she kept always at hand.

There was a little colored boy, by name, Eric, who came in on Thursdays to wait at table while Jemmett took his "afternoon off." But Eric never became an integral part of our ménage.

He was a sly, preternaturally solemn child with ambitions. He attended school regularly and boasted a bowing acquaintance with the French language which latter fact was a constant source of amusement for the other servants.

Emmy always addressed him as "Mon-soor" when she was in a good humor, and as "little sneakin' devil" when she was at outs, which seldom occurred unless she had tumbled a bit too freely the night before.

"God bless ye," she cried emotionally when I shook hands with her on arriving. "You have red hair; we'll get on well, I'm sure!"

"Red hair," we overheard Jemmett saying scornfully as DuVal and I left the kitchen, "her hair ain't red."

"What color is it, if it isn't red then?" Emmy challenged.

"Well—well, it ain't red," Jemmett stammered. "It's mo' like the color of new pennies," he finished triumphantly.

Our house was two stories high with a basement in which were laundry, furnace room and servants' quarters.

On the top floor were four bedrooms: DuVal's and mine with their connecting bath, separated by a square hallway from the others which were used as guest rooms. Each of these had its bath attached.

My husband's room where I went first to remove hat and wraps (my room was to be re-decorated) was furnished in massive walnut. The walls, almost concealed under the profusion of pictures in which etchings predominated, were papered in sand grey.

The only vivid note in the room was the rug, a deep velvet, the color of blood, that covered the entire floor.

His writing desk, set between two windows at the front, held a number of objects in jade and ebony, queerly and intricately carved.

In the center was a miniature, exquisitely framed in ivory.

"My mother," DuVal whispered, a tone creeping into his voice that I had never heard there before.

I bent over the desk and gazed at the face of a woman, lovelier in its purity of outline than any I had ever seen. Startling in its creamy pallor, the great, velvety eyes

looked back at me with a tragic questioning in their depths that stirred me unbearably. The hair was brushed back from the broad forehead in a sweep of dead black. The lips were thin, but beautifully modeled—a thread of vivid scarlet, they seemed to hold all sadness, all tolerance, all wisdom in their flow of line.

I turned away without speaking, but DuVal seemed to understand.

“That and this are my most prized possessions—after you,” he said softly taking up something from the desk that I had not noticed before.

It was a Christ on the Cross in ivory. One saw the tense, tortured muscles, the straining throat full of groans, the brow knotted in agony.

“It’s very rare—very wonderful,” DuVal was saying.

“It’s terrible,” I cried in a passion of revulsion, putting out my hands as if to shut the thing from my sight. “I can’t look at it—please!”

He replaced his treasure on the desk, looking at me curiously.

“My mother was a Catholic—I believe you are a pagan, Gretchen.”

I made no answer. The dim, luxurious room with the tortured Christ, the sad, beautiful woman, oppressed me.

It was with a great relief that I followed DuVal into the cream and blue bareness of the room that was to be mine.

It had four windows through which the pale sunlight was streaming, unchecked by curtains. A door at the

back opened on a little screened verandah, overhanging the sloping hillside that was our back lawn.

"I should like it to be all in white and silver with perhaps a black satin bed-cover—How would you like that, Gretchen, love?" DuVal asked musingly.

"Oh, no," I protested. "I want color, and yet more color!"

"Then color you shall have," he answered indulgently, drawing me into his arms with a gesture of unrestrained passion. "It is yours, for you to do with as you like," he said, kissing my hair and throat and lips, "just as I am."

"Now, let's look at the other rooms," I suggested, presently.

"Temporizer," he laughed, releasing me.

We went downstairs, arm in arm, to inspect the rest of the house.

The first floor contained kitchen, dining room, pantries, living room and library.

The dining room and the living room were well-furnished, pleasant enough, but without character. Only in the library had DuVal left the imprint of his personality.

It was a low, rectangular room, girdled by bookcases, filled to overflowing. In the quick survey I made of the books, I saw that many were in French and German, and that even the English titles were, in the main, curiously unfamiliar to me.

On two sides of the room, a line of windows extended along the top of the bookcases. The third wall was broken by a big stone fireplace. Above the mantel, an oil painting

of DuVal's mother smiled at us enigmatically with dark, unsatisfied eyes.

But the most striking feature of the room was a collection of ancient swords, daggers, stilettoes—knives of all descriptions, that hung over the bookcases along the fourth wall.

Wrought in brass and gold and silver, with steel blades that reflected the firelight in cruel, reddish gleams, they drew me irresistibly.

"My third, and last hobby," DuVal explained, "carvings, etchings, and these!"

I stood looking at them, attracted, and at the same time repelled.

Suddenly it flashed over me that DuVal affected me much as they did. I was attracted to him and at the same time repelled by hints of a character so different from my own that we could meet on common grounds of interest at few points.

"Come away," he said at last, laughingly, "or you'll get the fever too!"

I smiled at him and wandered back to the living room windows, looking out on the back lawn with its velvety turf and the three elm trees.

DuVal joined me.

"We'll plant irises down there," I said absently, pointing to the foot of a rock wall at the boundary of our place where the soil showed in a moist black streak, defiant of the grass.

"What a domestic little thing it is," DuVal teased me. "Do you like your home, dearest?"

I thought of the rooms, now showing evidences of lack of care, but which I should soon make my own. They would become livable under my planning—my touch. I thought of my father, of Alicia, of Mr. Grimble, of Madeline Montrose. I thought of Emmy and Jemmett. A great wave of peace came rushing over me. I had a home! This man had taken me from nothing and given me a home!

I turned and flung my arms about his neck with the first show of deep feeling I had displayed since our marriage.

“Oh, so much, so much,” I whispered close to his ear. “I can’t tell you how much!”

III

I SPENT the first two or three months of my married life in a fever of decorating. Everywhere new hangings were needed, my room had to be done over entirely—there was scarcely a spot that did not cry aloud for attention. With the exception of DuVal’s bedroom and the library, the house resembled a hotel more than a home. It showed that it had been slept in and eaten in, but not really lived in for a long time.

DuVal had plunged heart and soul into business. He left before I was up in the morning, indignantly refusing to have me wakened, and sometimes it was seven o’clock before he returned in the evening. He was one of the partners in an exporting concern that had its offices on Whitehall Street. More than this I could not get out of

him. He persisted in his old-school idea that the less women knew of business the better for everybody included.

Because I wanted so greatly to help, I made a few efforts at winning his confidence, but on each of these occasions, he was so plainly irritated that I soon dropped into the rôle of helpless womanhood which he had assigned to me.

"Don't bother your beautiful head with sordid things," he told me. "I'm not a millionaire, but I have money enough to give you what you want without your worrying the least bit."

Hurt by his lack of understanding, I never again referred to the export house, nor did he ever vouchsafe any information.

Once or twice, I met him at his office when we were going to dinner in town, but these visits were rare. On the whole, his life outside was as much a mystery to me as my father's had been when I was a little girl.

He made me a generous allowance, insisted that I should be always well-dressed, and scarcely a week passed that he did not bring me some present—a silver box for my trinkets—a yard of rare old lace—a filigree vase—a string of Venetian beads.

I was very happy with my house and yard, my browsings in DuVal's books, but there was a lack that I could not define.

The impression of unreality persisted. I sometimes had the feeling that I was in a state of suspended animation.

Women called on me. We were invited out constantly,

but there seemed to be nothing that touched me—that proclaimed itself mine.

“Did I play bridge? . . . No!”

Well, they must teach me.

The scrupulous sweated correctness of these women! . . . Their well-bred, joyless laughter, their talk cut to a single pattern like their clothes, pattered on me like so much fish food—thin, wafery, unsubstantial.

Marjorie Tremain was different. She wore the prescribed clothes, did the prescribed things, talked the prescribed talk, but always with a mocking eye turned on herself as if she found the prescriptions rather ridiculous and wondered why she bothered.

She took both my hands in hers when she left and looked at me with mocking tenderness—the mockery for herself, on account of the tenderness she showed for me.

“I’m glad you’ve come, Gretchen,” she said. “Don’t let us overpower you. You’re quite different—and those we can’t standardize, we rend limb from limb—but—well, you can choose which you prefer! I’d hate to see you standardized.”

She gave my fingers a last warm squeeze and was gone. Her long strides ate up the walk in a dozen steps. At the street, she turned, looked back at me standing on the verandah, and waved cheerfully.

I went into the house slowly, puzzling over her words.

Certainly I did not want to be rended limb from limb, but, did I want to become fish food?

IV

DuVal cared little for society. In this respect we were congenial. Evening after evening, we begged off from some party or other. He, to sit before the library fire, staring at the picture of his mother, reading one of the big volumes, or toying with his hobbies.

I usually crept away early to my own room with a book. In the day-time I loved to sit in the library, but when DuVal was there, I had a sense of intruding. The room was so entirely his, he dominated it so completely, and I felt that there he liked to be alone.

On Saturday nights there was always a poker game in the library. The regular crowd, four or five business men of our acquaintance, arrived soon after dinner and from then until nearly daybreak the rattle of chips and the clink of glasses mingled with excited bursts of talk and laughter drifted up to me.

On these occasions, DuVal became a different person. His air of quiet melancholy was replaced by a glittering feverishness of manner. He talked a great deal, was intensely restless, and during dinner kept poor Jemmett in what the latter termed "a stew."

If DuVal lost, he went about for days in a state of profound and uneasy gloom. He was incredibly superstitious, and it was less the loss of money than a feeling that fate was against him, which caused his perturbation.

On the other hand, if he won, he would come bursting into my room, intoxicated with success, wake me excitedly

to tell of his triumph. Then there was nothing that could resist him. His self-confidence was magnificent.

"I'll win the world for you, Gretchen," he once cried. "I'm the prince of magicians! The cards were submissive—they recognized their master to-night, and so shall you, my girl!"

The coins rained over me in little silvery tinkles, the bills fluttered wildly about like feathers plucked from a bird—He poured it all upon me—smilingly contemptuous.

"Buy a gold chain for yourself, and I'll fasten you to my wrist with it, you soft, luminous, untouched creature—Oh, God! Why are you so remote! My wife—pah! You've never been mine. But now you shall be, for now I am all-powerful—greater than God—much greater!"

DuVal was very drunk. He never showed the effects of his drinking unless he won.

"But how can I love you in this place that smells of geraniums and clover fields?" he muttered fretfully with a glance at the pale yellow walls of my room. "My love is crimson poppies and orchids and nightshade—my love is glorious death!"

He swept me out of bed, heedless of my protests, carried me in his strong arms through the bath into his own room.

A red-shaded light burned over the desk—bathed the Christ in a shower of blood. . . .

"My love is glorious death!" . . .

V

ONE Saturday evening I went into the library on some errand and found DuVal in his usual place, staring moodily into the flames.

In his hand he held a dagger with richly ornamented gold handle and curving blade.

He looked up and smiled as I entered.

"Does this speak to you," he asked quizzically, holding out the weapon before him.

"Of you, perhaps," I tried to answer.

"Of me? That is right."

He seemed pleased.

"In a way, it is me, because it speaks to me of myself.—There's nothing so sophisticated as a dagger, it is the very essence of subtle refinement. How many lovely breasts has it explored, do you think? To how many turbulent hearts has it brought peace . . .?"

His fingers caressed the thin blade down to its point.

"There's nothing superfluous about a dagger—look at that! It's like a slender, beautiful woman, exquisite, complete. . . . My mother was like that—and you are, too, Gretchen."

"So you make love to your daggers," I teased.

"No," he answered seriously, "my daggers make love to me."

His mood was strangely unlike the usual Saturday night hectic gaiety.

"Are you worried about anything?" I ventured.

"No, why?" he asked, surprised.

"I just wondered. . . ."

"Oh, Gretchen," he said with an air of just remembering, "I want you to come down to-night for a few minutes. There's a chap I want you to meet—he's just back from a trip to the coast. Minton Collins—we've been friends a long time."

Most of DuVal's friends were as exhilarating as cold boiled potatoes. I did not dislike them, but there was something in their manner that I resented vaguely. They made me extravagant compliments that always wound up by describing DuVal as a "lucky fellow." They might have used the same tone in congratulating him on a case of choice Scotch.

And he would sit, complacent, smiling at me possessively with his intense eyes.

Then, I had not begun to think or analyze. Indeed, it was long before I arrived at the point where I could formulate my own thoughts even imperfectly. But I received keen impressions none the less. I stored up all sorts of seemingly irrelevant matter into some obscure corner of my mind.

I ate and ate, as a cow does, and afterwards, lay down quietly to chew.

I speculated about what sort of person DuVal's friend would prove to be. It was evident that my husband was anxious for me to make a good impression.

But I was not at all prepared for the tall, blond man who rose to greet me with boyish warmth when I entered.

Mint Collins reminded me of Jake. As our hands met, a spark leapt between us. In that moment an under-

standing was established. I knew that we would be friends.

DuVal was watching me closely, but it was only when drinks were served and Mr. Collins proposed a toast that I began to suspect his surveillance was due to another reason than concern that we should like each other.

"Oh, Gretchen never drinks," DuVal interposed hurriedly.

"But I might this once," I suggested amiably, "since it's a very special occasion!"

"Thank you," said Mint Collins bowing to me.

"To your happiness—may it last a thousand years," he went on, raising his glass dramatically.

From his place on the other side of the fireplace, DuVal gave me a dark, unfathomable look that filled me with indefinable uneasiness.

VI

IN June, DuVal went to Maine for a week's fishing. He was done up, he said, with the strain of business worries. No, he did not want me to accompany him.

"It's the roughest kind of living, sweetheart; you couldn't stand a day of it."

I doubted this, but on the whole I rather looked forward to a week alone.

DuVal had been losing steadily at cards and his depression had hung over the house like a thunder-cloud. I think his flight was due to this more than to business worries.

Saturday afternoon, Mint Collins came over in his roadster to take DuVal to their club for a few hours' golf.

It was the first time I had seen him since we met.

"Where have you been, Mrs. Archer?" he demanded of me. "Surely, you don't sleep all the time. When I ask about you, DuVal always says you've gone to your room."

"And do I have to sleep when I'm in my room?"

"Well—" he laughed, "of course, not. But why don't you ever come down and sponsor the game, even if you won't play?"

"Oh, Gretchen doesn't like cards," DuVal explained, coming out on the verandah where we were sitting. "In fact, I'm sometimes afraid that she doesn't even like card players."

Mint Collins looked at me.

"Do you really object?" he asked with concern. "Then I say, it's awfully mean of us to come here every week and make you run away to your room!"

"I don't mind cards—or card players," I denied with a smiling glance at DuVal. "It's only the occasional effect of the former on the latter that worries me!"

DuVal flushed a dark red. Collins looked so uncomfortable that I regretted my speech at once.

"Well, no cards tonight as I'm leaving at nine-ten for the great solitude," DuVal said. "Come on, old chap."

He threw an arm affectionately about his friend's shoulders. Collins hesitated.

"Wouldn't you like to go, Mrs. Archer, we could play a few holes and then have tea at the club-house?"

"I think not, thank you."

"Thank God, my wife is not one of these horsey women," DuVal exclaimed. "She doesn't care about aping men's clothes and men's sports. You're a real woman—aren't you, dear?"

He bent over me where I lay in the hammock and kissed me with smiling eyes. It was the first time he had ever been at all demonstrative before other people and I shrank uncomfortable from his caress.

But Mint Collins had turned away and was staring at some remote object on the horizon.

They went off together, DuVal's arm across the shoulders of the other.

I looked after them—noticed that Collins towered above my husband—felt a quick rush of shame at making the comparison—hated myself for both!

DuVal left at nine. At the last minute he clung to me, exacting vows, protesting his love in terms that sounded extravagant to my even-pulsed affection.

When he had gone, I went into the library and picked up a book. But I could not read. His presence haunted the room, watchful—suspicious. I fell into a sort of reverie.

"I am I—Gretchen Archer. . . That is my name. . . I am married to DuVal who has gone to Maine for the fishing."

How queer, words!

"This is a chair." I touched it, but solidity seemed to

have gone from the object. It was not real. Only my touch was real.

"These are my breasts. . . . This long length of bone and white flesh is my thigh." But the flesh and bone were not real. Only my touch was real.

"That is a table—a mantel—a portrait." But they were not real. Only my sight was real.

"Those are books—unrealities into which men have stored the only realities. . . . This room is not a room. . . . It is something less—and more—than a room."

And now the room and all its solid objects seemed to whirl fantastically about me seemed to rise and float out of my consciousness. My body, too, seemed to have withered away and left only a core of questioning sensation behind. That and the smile of the portrait over the mantel were the only realities.

The smile was not seen. It was felt. Nor was it in any way connected with the lips or the woman. It was a fact—just that smile.

"Did you, too, question and doubt—and did you find the answer at last?" I pleaded aloud. "Oh, I am in such a maze—but there must be a way out. Things must mean something. Somewhere there must be keen feeling and conviction. That is it! I have no conviction. I do not really care. What has numbed me, body and mind?"

The smile remained—enigmatic—negative—but living!

"But why do trees come to leaf every year—Why do fruits ripen? Why, if I were an apple tree, I would not bloom or bear apples. I would not have sufficient conviction . . . I am barren—barren . . . But, I am beauti-

ful. That must have some meaning. . . . But you were beautiful, too! And Jake was beautiful! Even death is sometimes beautiful!"

I came to myself with a great wrench. Feeling flowed again through my body. The room became just a room. Its furnishings became chairs and books and tables.

I looked around, consoled by solidity. My soul was comforted by obviousness.

I opened the book on my lap. The pages fell apart at a place where the margin was crossed with delicate, spidery writing:

"Mother of God, how long! So hard I try—and it is no use. Always the same! Love of my body, yes—but what of my soul? Oh, my son—my little son—if it were not for you . . .!"

The dark eyes of the portrait gazed at me with tragic understanding. "I, too," they seemed to say.

But the lips remained as unrevealing as before.

VII

MARJORIE TREMAIN and I had become great friends. Hardly a day passed that she did not come drifting in nonchalantly, to spend an hour or two with me.

She would fling herself into a chair or across a lounge, produce the inevitable cigarette and, with the smoke curling snake-like from her nostrils, she would begin the conversation.

"How does it feel to be absolutely happy?" she asked me abruptly one day.

"I—don't—know."

"Hear, hear," she cried mockingly. "The bride of eight months doesn't know how it feels to be happy!"

"*Absolutely* happy," I corrected her.

"Oh, of course, if you're going to split hairs . . .!" She twisted about on the lounge and looked at me intently. "But, are you happy, Gretchen? I'm such an inquisitive person."

"Yes—I don't know! Who is? And, after all, when you're absolutely happy, doesn't it mean the end of growth?"

"Oh, it never lasts long enough to stunt your growth," she replied cynically. "I should have thought—DuVal is so enamored of you, and you sit here so steadily in your lovers' paradise—But, then, you never can tell!"

"DuVal is wonderful to me. It has nothing to do with him," I hastened to say. "But, don't you think, Marjorie, that no matter what one has, one always wants something more—or different?"

"Absolutely," she agreed, waiting for me to go on.

But I could not explain what I meant, because, as yet, I myself did not fully understand. So I asked her a question.

"Are you happy, Marjorie?"

"Oh, so-so. I won fifteen dollars at bridge this afternoon. Ellis' business is going big. He gives me a decent allowance, and is reasonably faithful to me. I'm getting a new automobile this month and spending July and August at East Hampton—unless I change my plans. Don't you think I should be happy?"

"Undoubtedly," I replied.

"Well, I'm not!"

Marjorie sat bolt upright, her mockery suddenly gone.

"For this is the divine joke of it: All that I have is pleasant enough, but I'd give it up without one regret, if I could have—Don't laugh, Gretchen—if I could have children!"

"I wasn't going to laugh."

"Well, I shouldn't blame you, if you did laugh. I think it's screamingly funny. To think that I'd want four or five howling nuisances around all the time! To think that I'd be willing to live in a Harlem flat and have my husband go out every morning with a tin dinner pail, if he could give them to me! Why don't you laugh, Gretchen?"

"Because I don't feel like laughing, dear."

"Do you want children?"

I shook my head slowly after a moment's pause.

Marjorie laughed, a little hysterically.

"Nor does anyone else but me! I swear, I'm the only woman God created with this longing—beside it, men mean nothing—and I can't ever have what I want most in the world!"

"But . . .," I began.

"Exactly—but!"

"I married Ellis when I was nineteen—just out of a convent. It was a most satisfactory arrangement. I had the social position. He had the money. Everything might have turned out well, but for a woman in Chicago.

Ellis was just a kid—he got out of the mess all right. But he can't—He told me all about it."

"He told you?"

"After we were married!"

"Then why," I began, and stopped. It had been on the tip of my tongue to ask why she didn't get a divorce, but I remembered that things could not always be disposed of so easily.

Marjorie read my thought.

"You forget," she said. "I had the social position. One can't live on that indefinitely."

"No," I said irrelevantly, "it's like virtue. Only rich women can afford it—and they don't have to."

"Besides," Marjorie added as if that settled it, "I'm a Catholic."

She rose with a return of her old manner.

"Heigh-ho, you mustn't take me too seriously, you green-eyed witch! I'm not nearly as miserable as I've been pretending. There is a little of the dramatist in all of us, I think, that makes us love to create tense situations! I haven't even the consolation of a great sorrow, so I magnify my whine. As a matter of fact, I like my husks, and if I had the Harlem flat and the honest working man, I'd probably dynamite the whole concern in a week!"

"Yes, I think you probably would," I agreed. "But that doesn't alter the facts of the case."

"Well, since you insist on my remaining a tragic figure, I suppose I shall have to be one! But, in that case, I must drown my sorrow in a greater tragedy. . . . Will

you go in to the theatre with me tomorrow night? Ellis abominates everything but musical comedies!"

"DuVal's coming on Sunday," I hesitated.

"Silly! Tomorrow's only Saturday. I'll get you back before Sunday afternoon."

"All right—I'd love to. I haven't been to town in a month."

"I know! It's the talk of the town. . . . DuVal's sudden disinclination for society. Why, before he married you, he was the shining social light of our crowd, and now he refuses to leave home for any party, however gay! How do you do it?"

"I? You mean that DuVal used to like to go out? Do you think . . . ?"

"My dear, I think nothing," Marjorie exclaimed, "except that your husband is very much in love with you and very properly refuses to cast his pearl before swine . . . which is, of course, hard on the swine, but undoubtedly the wiser course! Now say you forgive me for pouring my tale of woe into your sympathetic ears—and then I'll betake myself homeward!"

She stood very close to me. There was an undercurrent of sweet intimacy between us. Say what she might, nothing could change that. I was drawn irresistibly to this woman, braver than I, who could make a mockery of her unhappiness. For a long moment we stood there—closer than mother and daughter—closer than sisters—closer than friends.

Marjorie leaned down and kissed me swiftly on the lips.

"I love you, Gretchen."

I pressed close to her, felt her heart beating with my heart; the fragrances of our bodies blended in an indistinguishable harmony. The two fires that were our souls seemed to become fused in that moment of perfect understanding.

"Surely," I thought, "this is reality!"

VIII

WHEN we entered the theatre on Saturday evening, we found Mint Collins occupying the seat next to ours.

Marjorie was apparently as surprised as I.

"Well, this is pleasant," she exclaimed with her mocking twinkle. "How could you guess where we'd be sitting?"

"Well, now I wonder," Collins returned blithely.

I was left in doubt as to whether it had been prearranged or not.

Certainly they had a great deal to say to each other. Marjorie kept her eyes resolutely fixed on the stage, but Mint Collins hardly seemed to be aware of anything but her. He talked in a low tone close to her ear, seemed to be pleading with her. Occasionally, she shook her head decidedly, and once or twice she turned to answer him, but most of the time she looked straight ahead with that ironic smile of hers just touching the corner of her lips.

As for me, I was too busy speculating on this new turn of affairs to give more than a perfunctory attention to the play. It would have been an embarrassing situ-

ation had I not known Marjorie so well. As it was, I felt distinctly flattered—and touched—at this proof of her confidence in me. Mint Collins I had liked since our first meeting and when I compared him with paunchy, self-assertive Ellis Tremain, I wondered that Marjorie could hesitate a moment between them, if she were in love with Mint, as I suspected was the case. Then I remembered her words of the afternoon before:

“Besides, I am a Catholic.”

Poor Marjorie!

But Collins was more to be pitied. She, at least, had her faith to console her, while he could only beat his head despairingly against that strong bulwark—impatient—not understanding.

During the intermissions, conversation became general. They both turned to me with the air of seeking release. We discussed plays—past and present—books we had read—suburban idiosyncrasies—but not once were personal topics permitted to obtrude themselves. If one showed its head, it was instantly stamped on by the three of us.

A revolver shot rang out—the dying heroine fell into the arms of her lover whom she had betrayed. The curtain dropped on the last act.

Marjorie sighed ecstatically.

“I adore tragedies,” she said, “they make me feel so hopeful. Don’t you, Gretchen, dear?”

“Yes,” I answered. “That proves that there is still hope for us.”

“I suppose that hope has departed when one gets to the

point where one can enjoy nothing but musical comedies——” She laughed suddenly——“like Ellis. How are you going home, Mint?”

“Eleven-forty,” he answered laconically.

“Oh, that’s silly,” Marjorie protested. “Come go with us. There’s loads of room, and with Gretchen and Everett along, it will be perfectly respectable!”

“Heaven knows I don’t have to be persuaded,” he replied, “but why can’t we go somewhere first for a bite to eat?”

Marjorie hesitated a second.

“I don’t know—oh, why not!”

She looked inquiringly at me. I nodded.

Collins gave an address to the impassive Everett, and we crawled down Broadway in a jam of slow-moving automobiles that looked for all the world like a collection of venerable turtles.

“I will not dance on a revolving floor,” Marjorie refused, “it makes me dizzy just to look at it—You go on, Gretchen. I know you are young enough to be thrilled by it!”

“At least a year younger than you,” I scoffed.

“Nine,” she groaned, “nine! Take her away, Mint. You young things enjoy yourselves. I am not unconsoled.”

She lighted one of her long cigarettes and we left her contentedly inhaling.

“Isn’t she splendid—Marjorie?” said Mint Collins.

“She is—I love her.”

“So do I.”

He made the admission honestly, but with something of a boy's shy diffidence.

"I want to talk to you sometime, Gretchen," he went on using my first name naturally. "You can see how things are—Marjorie's crazy about you, says you are the most wonderful person in the world and all that. Would you—I wonder if you'd mind giving me some advice?"

"If you think it would be worth anything," I replied doubtfully.

"Then I'll ring you some afternoon soon, if I may—I'd like to see you alone, of course."

"All right," I agreed. "I'd be so glad to help, if I could."

We lingered over supper until nearly one. Marjorie professed herself appalled at the late hour.

"But Everett can get us home in twenty minutes, so we won't be too disgraceful," she added.

But, in spite of Everett's skilful driving, it was half an hour later before we reached Mount Vernon.

We dropped Mint at the apartment house where he lived in solitary state.

"Goodnight, Marjorie, thank you—goodnight, Gretchen, I'll be seeing you soon."

"Oh, Gretchen," Marjorie cried, all her brave defenses broken down. "Oh, Gretchen, I'm such a fool—I love him so!"

"Please don't cry—you aren't a fool. How can you help loving him?"

"I'm so wicked," she sobbed, her head on my shoulder.

"Nonsense!" I spoke crisply to bring her to herself. It would never do for her to go home red-eyed from weeping.

The car drew up in front of my door.

"Why don't you come in and stay with me tonight," I suggested, "tomorrow's Sunday and we could sleep late—you'll feel better then."

"I have to go to church," she murmured, wiping her eyes.

"Can't you stay away just this once?"

"Stay away from church," she cried in a shocked tone. "Why, if I didn't go to church, it would be a mortal sin on my soul!"

Marjorie had regained her air of banter, but I realized that she spoke with conviction.

"I'm all right," she smiled. "Good night, and thank you, dear."

I went into the house, pondering over this new development.

Marjorie weeping for Mint—Mint, bewildered at the situation in which he found himself, blindly trying to discover the solution—longing for sympathy which he quaintly phrased "advice".

It would not have been easy at best, but there was Marjorie's religion with its stern tenets that she could not ignore. Her religion that restrained, and at the same time comforted her! The jailor that made prison endurable!

Jemmett had left lights for me (I had told him not to

wait up) and I went about turning them off before going up to my room.

As I reached the top of the stairs, I caught a gleam of light that came from under the door of DuVal's room. For a moment I was startled. A scream rose to my lips.

Then the door opened and my husband appeared, smiling, but very pale.

"DuVal," I exclaimed. "I didn't expect you until to-morrow!"

"That," he remarked coldly, "is evident."

"What do you mean?" I asked, surprised at his tone.

"Come in. We can discuss our marital difficulties more conveniently in private."

I had not the faintest idea of what he meant by "marital difficulties," but I followed him obediently into his room.

"Sit down," he ordered curtly, pointing to a deep chair near the desk.

I noticed that the floor was covered with burnt matches and cigarette ashes—the desk was in wild disorder—DuVal was coatless and his soft shirt was unbuttoned at the throat—his hair looked as if it had not been brushed for days.

He followed my glance.

"You see the evidences of seven hours of torture," he told me. "For seven hours I've paced up and down this room, tormented with thoughts of you—wondering where and with whom you were—expecting you every minute, though I knew you would not come."

He came very close to me.

"Men do such little things on account of women they

happen to love. And, by God, there's not one of you soft, deadly parasites that's worth a second thought." His voice rose high on a note of hysteria. "Not a damned one of you," he repeated. "What do you care what a man feels so long as you can batten on him? Nothing!"

"Perhaps you'd better stop and explain what you're talking about," I suggested icily.

"Stop—explain! My God! She comes in at two o'clock in the morning, and then asks me to 'explain'! Do you think I'm a fool? It's you who would better *explain*!"

"Should I have sent you a telegram asking permission to go to the theatre with Mrs. Tremain," I asked, trying hard to keep my temper.

"So you went to the theatre with Mrs. Tremain—How do I know that you did? How do I know that you didn't go with someone you—met on the street?"

I leapt to my feet as if struck by a lash.

"You—unspeakable—cad! How dare you insinuate such things about me, things that you know are lies!"

"How do I dare?" DuVal was apparently enjoying the sight of my helpless fury. He was now calm—smiling, even. "Well, if personal experience counts for anything. . . ."

I did not give him a chance to finish.

Half crazed with rage, I flew into my room and slammed the door behind me.

IX

As I flung myself across the bed, I heard a low chuckle from the next room—such a sound, I thought, as might be

made by a fiend in hell on the arrival of a new consignment of lost souls.

For a while, I could not think. My mind was seething with hate to the exclusion of all else. DuVal had struck at the one vulnerable spot in my armor. No matter how I conducted myself, he would always have that taunt to fling at me. It made no difference that, aside from the unconventionality of our meeting, there had been nothing between us for which he could reproach me.

As always when under the stress of overwhelming emotion, I felt that the only way to get relief would be to do physical violence to the object of my hate. My fingers opened and shut spasmodically, longing for the feel of that dark throat between them.

How long I lay there with murder in my heart, I do not know. Never before had I been so angry, not even with my father, or Madeline Montrose, because never before had I been so helpless.

That was it! DuVal realized my helplessness, or he never would have dared to speak as he had done. If he had known I could walk out of his house, secure in the knowledge that I could live without him, he would have used more discretion in his choice of words. Why, he who was one of the most earnest apostles of "woman's womanliness" at heart scorned me for the very thing he had tried to nurture in me—"dependence."

What had he said? "—soft, deadly parasites—so long as you can batten on him. . . ."

They all scorned women for their dependence.

That was the first clear thought that I formulated.

In the light of it all sorts of things seemed to become intelligible—mother's life with father—Miss Martin's gold ring—Alicia's poor alternative—Mr. Grimble's confident advances—Marjorie and Ellis—Yes, even Jake. When I "made a fuss over a cocktail," he went out to demonstrate what a drunk man looked like!

The one who controlled the money was in some way made superior. Nothing women gave in return—home—care—children—could balance that fact.

When I had worked as a billing clerk for twenty dollars a week, I had given more than I received. Yet it was I who said a deferential "thank you" each week when they gave me my salary! Mother earned her board and kept a hundred times over, yet it was father who was the master, and the benefactor. I had worked for the Unlimited until I was too tired to sleep at night, but Mr. Grimble had demanded rights over my body for having given me a chance to wear it out in making money for him. Marjorie had raised her husband from an obscure outsider to a place in the circle where he had always wanted to move . . . yet Ellis patronized her because of her poverty.

It all could be boiled down to a question of economics.

I thought of Emmy's primitive philosophy. The first time Marjorie had called, my cook had been highly elated.

"That Missis Tremain? She's class, every bit of a lady. I don't know how she stands that husband of hers though—he's nothing but an old half-breed! But, he's got the cash," she had ended cheerfully, as if that made up for any minor insufficiencies.

Emmy was familiar with the histories of most of our neighbors and one of my most difficult tasks was bringing home the fact that I would not discuss my friends and acquaintances with her.

However, she and Jemmett held long arguments about this one and that one, and I overheard juicy snatches of gossip from time to time. Emmy's most unflattering epithet was "half-breed"; the highest compliment she could bestow was to credit a person with "class"; the factor which compensated for everything was "cash."

Now I saw that Emmy's philosophy, phrased in subtler terms, was that of most of the people I had known. It was a disillusioning discovery, but it explained much.

It was because I had no "cash" that I lay with dry, burning eyes on this bed, facing the hopeless problem of what to do.

One thing was certain. I could not remain here, to receive such charity as it might please my lord to bestow—to swallow his insults with the bread and meat he gave me.

Whatever might happen to me could happen, but I would leave.

The determination gave me courage. I rose and pulling out a suitcase from the closet, packed it with clothes I had bought before my marriage and such things of what DuVal had bought as were absolutely necessary. I laid out traveling clothes on a chair, and with this done, slipped off my evening dress, the silver slippers, the silken underthings (each one of them a lien!), put on my gown and went to bed.

My hot anger had burned itself away, leaving a cold, lead-like feeling about my heart. I was very tired too. Sleep came quickly.

X

SOMEONE was in my room, groping towards the bed. I realized bitterly that I had not even the right to privacy when I slept. There was no key to my door.

The next instant DuVal was beside me, holding me close to his body that shook with terrible sobbing.

"Gretchen—sweetheart—beloved, forgive me," he cried. "If you knew how I've suffered tonight! If you could even guess the hell I've been through, you'd understand how I could talk as I did! You know I didn't mean it—you know it's only because I love you so that you can make me miserable enough to forget I'm a gentleman—!"

"Love of my body, yes. But what of my soul!"

The cry of that dead woman came to me now poignantly. They might have been my own words. Perhaps DuVal resembled his father in more than name.

What use to prattle of forgiveness when a death blow has been dealt? My love for him, such as it had been, was dead. No pleading for pardon could revive it—I doubted if anything could revive it—but, if he wanted forgiveness. . . .

"It doesn't matter," I said.

"Oh, you are wonderful, dear—I don't deserve you—I'll spend the rest of my life trying to be worthy of you!"

"I forgive you, but I won't live with you any longer," I told him.

"You won't—Oh, Gretchen, don't be silly! Married people don't separate over their first quarrel!"

"It isn't the quarrel—it's what you said. You will always remind me of—that. I told you nothing good could come of a friendship begun as ours began. . . . You, who came to me with your talk of loneliness, and my 'shining honesty'! You, with your holier-than-thou attitude! Who are you to judge me? But I shall never give you the opportunity to humiliate me again!"

Anger and self-pity overpowered me. I spoke with biting contempt.

"Don't be unfair, Gretchen," DuVal begged. "Remember how I was tried—I had come back because I felt that another day without you would be agony, and I found you gone. . . . Look how I love you, Gretchen! Feel my head! It's burning with fever. I was not myself when I spoke to you as I did. See how I'm trembling! I'm sick, Gretchen—sick because I've hurt you—because something has come between us. You wouldn't leave me—you couldn't leave me!"

"I couldn't stay. I'd feel like—like a kept woman!"

"How can you say that! I've tried to make you happy. God knows, I've tried. I'll never do anything again to make you unhappy—I'll give you a separate bank account. . . . You shall be absolutely your own mistress. . . . Look how I grovel before you! . . . I kiss your feet. . . . I wash them with my tears unashamed. . . . I . . . Oh, what's the use! If you don't love me, you don't!"

He broke down and cried like a child.

In spite of my resentment, I felt a great pity move within me.

"Don't, please don't, DuVal," I begged.

I tried to raise his head—to comfort him, but the rack-ing sobs continued.

"It's no use, Gretchen. I can't make any woman happy. There's a blight in me somewhere that causes me to hurt what I love most. Oh, my darling, if you go, I'm lost! You're my last chance to save myself. . . ."

"To save yourself from what, dear," I asked for he had spoken with such despair in his voice that for a moment I was frightened.

"From myself," he answered, nor could I get any other explanation. "You will stay, won't you Gretchen—I need you so!"

"Yes, I'll stay," I said slowly after a few minutes thought.

If he needed me, it was no more than I could do to stay. Twice he had helped me when I needed help. Now I should try to even the account. It would not be easy. The memory of this night would die hard, I feared, but I would try to forget—which, after all, is more than forgiving.

He went to sleep contentedly with his head cradled on my arm, but I lay awake until the sky was all rosy with sunrise. Long, gilded fingers crept through the curtains and touched my husband's face. A little pucker appeared between his eyes. He looked pale, and tired, but almost beautiful in sleep.

I drew my arm from under his head and stretched myself, loving the strong pull of muscles in my young body.

DuVal still slept, one arm flung out, his dark head burrowed in the pillow.

I remember wondering that we two should be lying there with our bodies touching, and yet be separated as the poles. What a little he knew of me! And how little I knew this man whom I had promised to honor and obey until death!

I remember that a line from Genesis ran through my consciousness like a purple thread: "Male and female created He them."

"And never the twain shall meet," I added, flipantly ironic.

XI

AFTER that dreadful night, DuVal was more courteous and considerate than ever. Neither of us ever referred to it in any way. I was trying hard to forget, and he, I knew, was not proud of the part he had played. But, for all that, things were different.

Having once seen what jealousy could do to him, I was now always on guard lest something I said or did might rouse that insane passion again. And, I suppose, that once having suspected me, he could not rid himself of the shadow of doubt.

When we sat together in the evenings, I would sometimes look up from my book to find his eyes fixed on me with a gnawing, hopeless expression in their depths, the meaning of which I could not fathom. He was more quiet,

too, more melancholy. Even his hobbies seemed to have lost some of their attraction for him.

He had carried out his promise about a separate bank account. I now signed checks at will, but otherwise, I was less my own mistress than before. Not that he inquired as to my movements, but because of an uneasy feeling that he suffered acutely when he did not know where I had been and with whom.

I stayed at home more closely than before. I would have become a veritable recluse, if it had not been for Marjorie. She had given up her trip to East Hampton for some reason, and came to see me almost every day. We fell into the habit of taking long walks together. We would go for miles in silence, or else speaking of trivial matters. She had not mentioned Collins to me since that night after the theatre, and I did not like to introduce the subject. She did not seem unhappy. Except for a greater gentleness there was no apparent change in her. We hardly needed to talk, so in sympathy we were. I often had a sense of our being twin cocoons, blinded by our swaddlings, but mysteriously undergoing a metamorphosis of which we were unconscious.

DuVal did not like Marjorie.

"She's playing the devil with Collins," he had once said to me.

I knew that he disapproved of my intimacy with her, but this I could not give up. Besides, I regarded it as highly improbable that he would consider it of sufficient importance to become jealous, even though he might believe her to be a "bad influence."

One Wednesday afternoon we went unusually far. It was nearly dinner time when I reached home. Duval was pacing up and down the verandah waiting for me.

"You won't have time to dress," he said smilingly when I ran up the steps, out of breath. "But, then, you look very charming as you are!"

"Oh, I'm sorry," I apologized contritely, knowing how DuVal cherished the little amenities of civilization. "We didn't realize how far we were going! Don't you suppose, if I hurried . . ."

At that moment Jemmett announced dinner.

"There was a gentl'mun called you this afternoon, Mrs. Archer," he added. "I tol' him you was out, and he said he'd phone again."

"A gentleman," I exclaimed in surprise, with not the faintest idea of whom it might have been.

I caught the searching glance that DuVal flashed at me. During dinner he sat in a tight-lipped silence that I tried in vain to break through.

I went to my room early, chilled by his formal politeness, not a little offended by the suspicion I knew he was harboring.

About nine o'clock the phone rang and I answered at the extension upstairs.

It was Mint Collins who reminded me of my promise to see him, and asked if he might come the following afternoon. I gave him permission. We chatted of impersonal things for a moment and then said goodbye.

As I started to hang up the receiver, I heard the faint,

unmistakable sound of the receiver in the hall below being replaced cautiously on its hook.

I had a sudden furious impulse to dash downstairs and accuse my husband of eavesdropping. The servants had gone to their rooms and he was alone on the first floor. But, what good would it do?

If he had "listened in," and misconstrued the conversation, he would suffer more than I. In any case, I could make no explanation. Aside from the question of my stiff-necked pride, there was Marjorie's secret to guard. Then, too, there was just a chance that I had been mistaken. I decided to give him the benefit of the doubt, since in any case, I could do nothing.

XII

"WHAT it all comes to," Mint was saying, "is this: I love Marjorie, she loves me, and if it weren't for that damned religion of hers—I beg your pardon, Gretchen, but it's driving me crazy!"

He bowed his head in his hands and sat there, the picture of despondency.

What could I say? What could be done? That was just what it came to—deadlock.

Mint was not the sort to nourish a hopeless passion, one glance at him convinced me of that. He demanded action of some kind. Any situation would have been easier for him to cope with than this into which he had stumbled. He was like a bewildered little boy. He simply

couldn't understand why he should be balked by anything so intangible as a belief.

"If she loved her husband, or even if she turned me out because she wanted to be absolutely above-board with him, I could give her up. But she doesn't care about him. How could she! Anybody but Marjorie would have left him long ago. He's acted like a skunk towards her ever since they were married. . . . No, it's just because she's got some darned idea that divorce is a sin. . . . I'd sin for her, Gretchen. . . . Why won't she do the same for me? She would, if she really loved me—and yet, she does love me. I'd stake my soul on that."

"She does, Mint—I know she does. That's what makes it so hopeless."

"Couldn't you talk to her, Gretchen—persuade her—do *something*?"

I looked at him sadly.

"There's nothing I can do—there's nothing you can do. Marjorie feels she's right, and heaven itself couldn't shake her. . . . Can't you be content with knowing she loves you? Believe me, Mint, that means a great deal. What does possession matter when there's love?"

Even as I spoke I realized the futility of my plea. Ask this red-blooded, vital creature to be satisfied with an emotion! One might as well ask a tiger to live on dew-berries.

He twitched impatiently.

"I can't, Gretchen. I'm a man, not a wax figure. I've never wanted anything like I want Marjorie. If I can't

have her, well! I can't stand by and watch her living with a man she despises. That's sure!"

He rose and smiled determinedly.

"You've been a brick to listen to me, and let me tell you something. . . You'd better get down on your knees and thank God you're not up against what I am!"

Always the same! Each one of us in a separate torture room. Each one of us thinking his own little purgatory is the only one on earth!

Late afternoon sun was streaming into the library, picking out rich gleams of red and blue and yellow in the rugs, making a shining glory of the swords and daggers on the wall. In its light, Mint's hair was burning gold. I thought of another blond man whose hair had looked like spun metal. Because of Jake, my voice was very tender as I spoke to him.

"Poor Mint! We're all up against something—but yours is very hard, I know."

"It is," he said briefly, the suggestion of strain about his mouth intensifying. "But you've been very sweet to me—and to her. I never can thank you enough!"

He bent over my hand and kissed it.

As he did so, I caught sight of "Mon-soor" standing open-mouthed in the door behind him.

"You're wanted at the 'phone, Mrs. Archer," he announced with bulging eyes.

XIII

It was DuVal saying he would not be home for dinner. This had not happened since we were married, and I

wondered what important deal could have come up to keep him at the office.

It was ten o'clock before he came. I had gone to my room with a book and was lying in bed, half-reading, half-dreaming when he walked in.

"Well, what have you been doing to amuse yourself?" he asked leaning down to kiss me.

"Oh, nothing much," I answered.

"Had a good time today?"

"Not too exciting."

"No walk, nor callers, nor anything," he persisted, still with his air of banter.

"Mint Collins came in for a while this afternoon—otherwise I've spent the day very much alone."

DuVal started.

"Collins," he exclaimed somewhat sharply, "why wasn't he at work?"

"I really don't know," I smiled. "It wouldn't have been very hospitable to ask, would it?"

"No, I suppose not," he agreed absently. "Did he stay to dinner?"

"I didn't ask him when you 'phoned you would not be here."

"You didn't? No, of course, you wouldn't—of course, you wouldn't."

We were silent for a time. I was trying to imagine the thoughts that were running through that dark head. DuVal sat on the edge of my bed, his slender, exquisitely kept hands clasped about his crossed knees. He was

pondering something, I could see. Suddenly he smiled, as if at some delightful secret.

"I haven't brought you a present for ever so long, have I?" he asked affectionately. "I've something for you tonight. . . I hope you'll like it."

Without waiting for an answer, he hurried from the room.

"Shut your eyes," he demanded, with a great show of mystery when he returned, carrying something which he kept carefully behind him.

I did so, curious to know what new treasure he had found for me.

I heard him carefully place something on my bedside stand. Then he knelt and took both my hands in his.

"Don't open your eyes, yet," he begged. "I've brought you the most beautiful thing that I have ever seen, Gretchen. I want you to promise me that you will always keep it where you can see it to remind you of me."

His voice was soft, almost crooning.

"To remind you of how much I love you—how terribly much I love you. . . . Will you promise?"

"Of course," I answered a little impatiently. Though I had long ago ceased to be surprised at any of my husband's moods, I thought he was attaching a little too much importance to the gift he had brought me.

He kissed me slowly on the lips.

"Then, open your eyes, fairest of women, and behold!"

There in a shrine of ebony, beautifully fashioned, stood the ivory Christ.

I looked at it with the same horrified shrinking I had

felt at my first sight of it. Now I had promised to keep it always where I could see it! What was the motive back of this subtle torture that DuVal had inflicted on me? He knew how I loved beauty and joy—how the sight of pain repelled me, caused me to actually suffer. He must remember my first reaction to this treasure of his! Of course, he remembered! That was why he had done this—to hurt me.

“Aren’t you pleased?” he asked with a pretense at anxiety.

I looked at him without replying. Under my gaze, his face darkened and became stern—almost fanatical. He pointed to the Christ.

“He, too, loved greatly—and was crucified!”

Without another word, he abruptly left the room.

I placed his gift gingerly on my desk in a corner of the room.

It was significant that afterwards I always wrote in the library.

XIV

I SELDOM read the papers. The daily dishing up of crime, scandal, political news, automobile accidents and the weather held no attraction for me. But one morning when DuVal and I sat at breakfast together, I picked up a section of the paper from the floor where he had dropped it, and opened to the theatrical news.

The first thing that caught my eye was a quarter-page advertisement of “The Rose of Arcady, a Stupendous Drama in Three Reels, featuring Geraldine Grey” (the

name Mr. Grumble had urged on me for film use). Heading the advertisement was a picture of myself in one of the simple gingham dresses that the Rose had affected before her sudden transformation into an heiress whose clothes had cost me nearly half my salary.

There was a review, too, that said a great many nice things about me. One sentence stuck in my mind:

This young actress, so astonishingly like Miss Montrose, displays in her work during the early part of the picture, that curious, glowing quality, impossible to describe, which seems to be the hallmark of genius in any field of art. During the final reel, her likeness to the older actress becomes (regrettably) more marked. Here she has imitated those unfortunate mannerisms of the International star, and loses her admirable restraint in flares of obviousness and sentimentality for which Miss Montrose has been criticised so often.

I could hardly believe my senses. So the canny Unlimited had not been the loser after all. But how had they managed the final scenes with the star gone? In spite of my aversion from pictures, dating since the dance of the devils, I was consumed with curiosity to see how that film ended.

"DuVal," I said suddenly, "I'm going into town with you this morning."

He put down his paper.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I'm going into town with you this morning—can you wait for me to get dressed?"

"Why, of course," he replied cordially. "I'll take a day off and we can run around together."

"That's awfully sweet of you, but I'd rather—that is, I've lots of things to do, and I think probably . . ."

"Just as you like," he said, coldly polite.

"Can't we meet somewhere for lunch? You won't want to run around to the shops with me—it would be frightfully boring," I added in an effort at conciliation.

Half an hour later, we were speeding into New York in the little car that my husband used in going to and from his office.

We were both very quiet. I was excited and nervous as a bride. My head was too full of speculations about "The Rose of Arcady" to worry very much on account of DuVal. No one of our friends knew of my short career as a motion picture actress. Even DuVal did not know that I had been starred by the Unlimited. There was slight chance of his discovering it, as he abominated moving pictures. I wanted to see this play alone—to face whatever revelation it might bring without any prying eyes watching to discover how I felt. DuVal was hurt by my refusal of his offer to accompany me, I felt sure. But that would have to be as it was. If he thought I was engaged on some underhand errand, he would have to make the most of his suspicion. I could not explain without giving myself away, and this I felt would be intolerable.

DuVal dropped me at Forty-second Street. I took a taxi and went immediately to the theatre where "The Rose of Arcady" was being shown. At this time, the balcony was practically empty, as I had hoped would be

the case. I sat in the first row and waited with tremulous eagerness for the sight of my face on the screen.

The orchestra played softly. Four women in Russian costume appeared on the stage in a barbaric folk-dance. The news film seemed interminable. But at last it all came to an end. There was a moment's pause in which I seemed almost to hear the pounding of my heart. Then, with tantalizing slowness, four words flashed on the screen:

THE ROSE OF ARCADY

During the forty-five minutes that followed, I understood for the first time why girls and women were willing to pay whatever might be asked in order to get an opportunity of acting before the camera.

In all my life, I think I have never known a fascination equal to that of watching myself. To study every line, every feature, every gesture—to commend and to criticise myself with the detachment of another person, gave me a miraculous sense of power—it is the only word. It may be that I am more egotistic than others. But that does not seem to account entirely for the tremendous elation that possessed me in the theatre that August morning. If I were a great writer with stores of knowledge and a command of words, I might explain what I felt so that it would be intelligible. I might go into involved analyses of why I felt so. As it is, I can only say that it was akin to a spiritual experience. Nor did the memory of how it had been won detract from its significance.

Through scene after scene I sat there, rapt, in contemplation. Suddenly I sat erect, tense. There on the

screen was a woman who looked the same as I—who walked and smiled as I did. But it was someone else. The vague idea I had received on reading the review that morning, crystallized into a certainty. It was Madeline Montrose.

It was she who had taken up the thread of the story where I had dropped it—she, the Unlimited had bribed in order not to lose the vast sum that had been spent on this production. They had offered me eight thousand a year. . . . I wondered how many thousand Montrose had demanded—and received, before she would agree to take the risk involved in breaking her contract with the International.

All at once a jubilant thought occurred to me. This woman who had caused me so many weeks of worry—on account of whose jealousy I had all but starved—was in my power. A word to the International people and she was ruined, just as surely as if I had thrown acid into her lovely, treacherous face.

It would not be my word against hers—I had proof.

The Unlimited had advertised this picture as having taken a year to complete. It was nearly a year ago that I had walked out of Mr. Grimble's office for the last time. There was my marriage—DuVal was not unknown. What a story it would make! All sorts of black thoughts flitted through my brain—thoughts that I am now ashamed to recall, so small and malicious they were. My only excuse is that this woman had made me suffer greatly—had driven me into situations which, if I had not been so sorely harassed would never have developed.

As I now look at things, I realize that she was only the indirect cause of my misfortunes. But ever since that day at the International offices when Jimmie had whispered the story of her "row" about me, I had blamed her for everything that happened to me. And it was very recently, indeed, that I overcame my resentment towards her.

When I left the theatre, it still lacked half an hour of the time when I had promised to meet DuVal for lunch.

On the spur of the moment, I hailed a taxi and gave the address of the International Studio.

Jimmie, looking a little older, but as slick-haired and impudent as ever, was alone in the hall when I walked in.

"All out to lunch," he announced curtly.

"That's what I hoped," I replied. "I wanted to see you a moment. I'm Gretchen May, Jimmie."

"It's kinda dark in here," he apologized. "I thought you was that big-stiff, Montrose."

"Can you tell me, Jimmie," I asked, coming to the point at once, "when Montrose took her vacation?"

"Sure—three months, April to first of July."

"Thank you very much." I took a bill from my purse and offered it to him.

"Say," he ejaculated scornfully.

"Please," I begged. "You helped me out once, and I'd like you to let me do this—it's nothing."

He took the money and placed it absently in a pocket with an air of obliviousness that was delicious.

"You and her still scrapping," he grinned.

"Scrapping? Oh, no—at least, not yet."

I reached the Waldorf fully ten minutes before DuVal.

"Hello," he cried coming in hurriedly, "did you buy yourself lots of pretty dresses?"

"Dresses," I echoed blankly, having like a poor liar forgotten all about my excuse for going off alone.

Under his meaning smile, recollection came. I could have cursed myself for having strengthened his doubts.

"Oh, no," I tried to smooth it over, "I couldn't find anything that I liked."

XV

THE first two weeks of August wore away, and still I had taken no steps to expose Madeline Montrose's breach of faith.

I thought of it often—picturing a thousand dramatic scenes which always culminated in the cool statement from me that would bring the world thundering down about her ears. But something always held me back. I think, a conviction that the time would come inevitably without any seeking on my part.

Meantime, I had plenty of food for thought in the situation that had developed at home.

DuVal, adhering to the letter of his promise, never in so many words cast doubts on my honesty. But since that day in New York his manner towards me had been a covert sneer that was far more effective than words, because less tangible.

When he made love to me—as he still did, in spite of our estrangement—it was with an air of contemptuous patronage, indescribably humiliating, as if he despised

himself for needing me, despised me for the hold I had on his senses; though, God knows, I was quite unconscious of any efforts to attract him.

He regarded me as a Circe who lured men into my power only to change them to swine. For the first time I began to think of my body as shameful. And that is not good for anyone.

His references to his first wife became frequent—in comparison with me, she was presented as a paragon of all the virtues. DuVal had apparently forgotten his remarks about her on the night we dined at Sherry's, but I had not.

I began to wonder about the first Mrs. Archer. Always before I had seen her in the light of DuVal's criticism and self-pity. Now I realized that she had probably been harried as I was being harried. I decided that she might not be so much to blame, after all. I conceived the strangest longing to know this woman—we two, I felt, would be closer than anyone I had yet known, even Marjorie, because of our common experience. She was the only person on earth who could enter understandingly into my perplexities.

I had not seen Marjorie for some time when she 'phoned one morning and invited DuVal and me to a party.

"It's informal—just you and the Allens and the Cumberlands and the Jacksons—a few unattached of both sexes, and Mint."

Her voice softened on the last word.

"Come early, Gretchen," she added, "I've something important to tell you. . . . Tonight, then, dear!"

At first DuVal steadfastly refused to go.

"It's too hot to be pleasant—besides it will be an infernal bore," he predicted ungraciously.

"But you've no excuse," I pointed out. "Marjorie'll be hurt. And it will look queer, if you don't go. . . . Everyone knows what good friends Marjorie and I are."

"Oh, you can make up some excuse for me."

"Please, DuVal! Just this once," I begged.

He finally yielded, but insisted that he would not stir from the house before nine-thirty—That, if I must go early, Jemmett could drive me over and then bring the car back for him.

So when at eight o'clock I ran up the broad stone steps at the Tremains' and rang the bell, I was alone.

Marjorie herself answered.

"I was expecting you," she cried excitedly. "Where's DuVal?"

"He's coming later," I explained.

Ellis heaved himself out of an easy chair and came over to speak to me with the fatherly air he affected.

"Now you run on and smoke," Marjorie commanded. "I've lots of things to tell Gretchen and I'm going to take her up to my room for a little talk—it's been ages since we saw each other."

"Go along, go along," Ellis gave us his permission. "I know girls will be girls!"

He chortled deeply at his wit as Marjorie took my arm and piloted me to her bedroom.

She closed the door behind us and sank in to a chair, motioning me to do likewise. The sparkle of excitement

had faded from her face leaving it tired and a little drawn. Her eyes were lusterless.

"It's the end, Gretchen," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"Of everything," she answered with a weary gesture. "Mint's going away. . . . His company has a branch on the coast and he's asked to be transferred out there. I begged him to. . . Things can't go on as they've been. It's too hard for both of us. . . Mint always talks about being a man—well, I'm a woman, Gretchen, and it isn't easier for a woman." She paused a moment and then continued in a lower tone. "One day last week we motored up to Connecticut. We stopped for lunch at a little inn . . . I was weak, sinfully weak . . . I shouldn't have, but, oh, Gretchen, you can understand if you were ever in love!"

"I know, dear," I said consolingly.

"I'd been trying to send him away for months," Marjorie went on. "But it was only after—after *that*, I could do it. Isn't that queer, Gretchen? One would think that I could not let him go after we'd loved—It was the other way with me. I know now that that's why I couldn't bear for him to go before—! This is really a farewell party for him. Ellis suggested it. Ellis is very fond of Mint."

"When is he leaving?"

"Sunday night, I think," Marjorie answered.

"What will you do?" I asked pityingly.

She hesitated a moment and then giving me a glance,

half-shy, half-defiant, replied with a reawakening of animation.

"I'll tell you, Gretchen—you'll never believe it! I'm going to adopt a baby!"

"A baby," I echoed incredulously.

"Yes. Ellis wouldn't hear of it before. He was afraid it would take me away from him!" She laughed scornfully. "When we came back from Connecticut that day, and I told Mint it had to be the end. . . . I asked Ellis again, and he agreed. If he hadn't I rather think I should go west with Mint."

"I hope you'll be happy, Marjorie," I told her, feeling that the words were woefully inadequate.

"I think I shall be," she said slowly. "It isn't easy—you know it isn't—but, well, I want a child more than anything in the world. And I know that if I went with Mint I'd never be happy. I suppose I'm foolish and old-fashioned, but I don't believe anyone can win happiness by doing wrong!"

She looked at me. Her magnificent self-control shattered and disappeared. Suddenly she flung herself at my feet and buried her face in my lap.

"Oh, Gretchen, Gretchen," she sobbed. "I know I'm doing right, but tell me you think so, too. I've no one to advise me that really cares."

"Marjorie—you're doing right, if you're doing what you must. Don't you know that, dear?"

"I—I think so."

I looked at the slender body huddled on the floor, at

the proud, dark head, now humbled, at the white, quivering shoulders. . .

"You're splendid, Marjorie," I said, using Mint's words of three months ago.

"I'm not," she protested. "I'm a miserable, whining wreck, and I wonder how you can put up with me!"

She raised her head and smiled at me affectionately.

"It's you who are splendid. . . Why don't you have twins, Gretchen," she asked whimsically, "and give one of them to me? I'd love to have a baby of yours."

"I haven't the right! It's a terrible responsibility to have children, don't you think? It's only very conceited people who bring them into the world without any qualms. I'm not good enough—or conceited enough."

"Silly," she scoffed. "You owe it to the world to perpetuate that marvelous hair, if nothing else!"

"I have no conviction of owing the world anything," I retorted soberly.

"Have it your own way," Marjorie laughed. "Are my eyes red?"

"Not a bit."

"Then let's hurry down—I suspect my guests are arriving."

The Jacksons and Mint Collins were the only ones who had come. Mr. Jackson, solidly prosperous and unimaginative, was solemnly talking business with Ellis. Aileen Jackson, a little bird-like woman with roving eyes, was flirting outrageously in a corner with Mint who looked very bored and dejected.

He brightened wonderfully when we came in. I thought

that anyone less confident than Ellis must have guessed the true state of affairs from the look he bent on Marjorie as they shook hands.

Aileen noticed. I saw her bright little eyes gleam maliciously as she turned to our hostess.

"Isn't it a shame that he's going away, Marjorie? I don't know how we'll get along without him, do you?"

The thrust glanced off Marjorie's armor of smiling indifference.

"It will be very hard," she admitted lightly, "but I suppose we shall have to make the best of it, since Mint's mind is quite made up."

"Oh, you'll be consoled, all right," he said so gloomily that I could have laughed.

Women can say so many things in a language that men do not understand. It is like grown people's spelling what they do not want children to hear.

No one of the men in the big room was aware that this was anything but an exchange of pleasantries. Yet, Marjorie and her guest had crossed swords, and Aileen was the vanquished.

Soon others came: Mr. and Mrs. Cumberland who always reminded me of Jack Spratt and his fat-loving wife, the Allens, he dark and saturnine, she, looking like an advertisement of Holeproof Hosiery in her well-groomed blondness. With the Allens came Stuart Longworth, a fast withering bud of five seasons ago, who displayed eighteen inches more of scrawny back than was good for her chances.

"Where's Lilla?" Stuart demanded in a high, domineering voice.

"She's coming with Henry White," Marjorie said. "They haven't shown up yet."

"Who's Lilla," I asked Aileen Jackson.

She shook her finger playfully at me.

"Lilla, my dear, is an old flame of your fascinating husband—you'd better keep an eye on her. She's visiting the Cumberlands. Funny you haven't met her—but, then, you and DuVal never go anywhere. . . . Isn't he coming tonight?"

"Oh, yes, later," I replied.

Just then he walked in accompanied by Henry White and a long-limbed woman in the late twenties. She was the typical "prom girl" grown old in service. Dashing, careless, superficially good-natured, there was something familiar about her, but it was much later in the evening that I discovered she looked like my cousin, Lagi. As she entered, she took in the men present with a calculating glance. Her eye lightened with a gleam such, I thought, as a veteran war-horse might display at the smell of powder.

"I just now understand why D. V. could leave me in the lurch so brutally last summer," she remarked to me when we were introduced. "I don't feel half so badly about it, now that I've seen you," she added with a frank smile.

DuVal was in high good spirits. He included me in a general smile of greeting, and then proceeded to devote himself to Lilla Bingham.

Mint Collins edged over to me.

"I want to see you for a minute, Gretchen. Will you slip away to the music room when you get a chance? I'm about all in—and you were so sweet to me before. . . ."

"Yes," I assented as Ellis bore down upon us.

Mint slipped away as soon as he decently could, and left me with Marjorie's husband.

"You look stunning, Gretchen," he announced, surveying me from head to foot. "In fact, you're about the best-looking little woman around here, if anyone should ask me!"

"Oh—I don't know," I demurred.

"You're no judge of it—no judge at all," he insisted. "What is it that Burns fellow said: 'Oh, wad some power the Giftie gie us to see ourselves as others see us'—pretty neat line, don't you think?"

"Yes, very," I replied absently.

DuVal was openly making love to Miss Bingham under a shaded light at one end of the long room. Marjorie, very distinguished in the shining severity of her black sequin dress, wandered among her guests with nothing except an added tinge of pallor, and a darkening of her grey eyes to indicate the emotional storm raging within her. Mint, smoking endless cigarettes, was leaning over Stuart Longworth, who had turned the expanse of her unfortunate back on Elizabeth Allen.

Little gusts of conversation came to me where I stood talking with Ellis:

"Two husbands—my dear, she's had three, *at least!*" . . . "I sold out at 40—cleared a cool twenty thou-

sand." . . . "She's marvelous in the last act. They say old Evans. . . ." . . . "I get it from my man at fifty the case—imported stuff."

Two butlers served drinks.

As the evening passed, talk became louder, more boisterous. Ellis made frequent alleged funny remarks, usually introduced by: "As the little boy said . . ." or some such phrase.

"Have a cocktail, Gretchen?"

"No, thank you," I declined a little uncertainly. The two I had already taken were causing the floor to move somewhat unsteadily under my feet.

"Well," Ellis said gaily, taking a glass from the tray, "as the old woman said when she kissed the cow: Everyone according to his own liking."

As soon as I could get away, I went unobtrusively towards the door to the music room.

In comparison with what I had left, it was like a quiet backwater after the roar of the surf.

I leaned out of a window and drew long breaths of the warm, fragrant air into my lungs. In a few moments Mint joined me.

"Has Marjorie told you," he asked abruptly.

"Yes—and I'm so sorry, Mint!"

"It's just about finished me," he said dejectedly. "I don't see how she can do it. I just don't understand, Gretchen, how she can have no more feeling for me than she has!"

"You mustn't talk like that, Mint. She has a great

deal of feeling for you, or she never could do what she's doing."

"Perhaps," he shrugged with an attempt at cynicism. And then his defenses broke down. He wept, much as Marjorie had wept earlier in the evening.

I rested my hand on his head. It was all I could think to do that would express my sympathy for him.

"Where's my wife," we heard DuVal's voice inquiring loudly.

The next instant he stood in the doorway with Lilla Bingham, smiling nervously, beside him.

"Who's in this dark'n s'cluded room with my wife, I want to know—Oh, it's you," he cried amiably as he recognized Mint. He crossed the room unsteadily, beaming on Mint who sat on a divan at my side without moving.

"Thash perf'y all right, old scout. Pardon me for interrupting. You're a damn' nice fellow, Collins. There's nothing I wouldn't do for you. You go right ahead!"

Lilla Bingham laughed excitedly. "Oh, DuVal," she protested in a semi-shocked tone.

"You're drunk, DuVal, I think you'd better apologize to Mrs. Archer and then go home and sober up," Mint suggested coldly.

"Who's drunk? Me? Not much," DuVal denied jovially. "I jus' like you, Mint. That's all!"

XVI

I THINK it was Marjorie who made Ellis persuade DuVal to go home. I know that she was very angry, and half in

tears when I told her good night and she gave my husband a look of such scorn as I would not have supposed her capable of feeling.

It was not as embarrassing as one might think, because most of the others had drunk enough to be tolerant, at least. But at the time I thought I should die of shame. Lilla Bingham had heard everything. That was hardest to forgive. The look in her eyes had frightened me. It was the savage joy of the failure in beholding the successful rival's humiliation. It frightened me because of its baseness. I had not quite realized before that human nature could touch such depths.

DuVal went to bed at once. We had not addressed a word to each other since leaving the Tremains.

The next day was Saturday. When I went down to breakfast, Jemmett told me that Mr. Archer had already gone, which was unusual, as on this day he seldom bothered to go to the office at all. Nor did he come home for lunch. At six o'clock he 'phoned Jemmett that he was dining in town, but had invited a crowd to come in for poker, as usual, in the evening.

Soon after dinner, I went to bed with a book: *Madame Bovary*. It is significant that my taste for romances had run its course. I demanded something uncompromisingly true to life. It was help I wanted now, not sugar frosting.

DuVal came in about nine. I heard him run upstairs, but he did not come into my room, and I did not call to him. He must be the one to make overtures, I decided.

One by one the players arrived. From the noise, I

judged that the crowd had got an early start with its drinking.

DuVal called impatiently for Jemmett. There was a sound of ice being crushed in the pantry. I hoped drowsily that they would not break any of my crystal glasses. Then I went to sleep.

I do not know how long it was before I was awakened from an uneasy dream by noises in the hall outside my door. The moon had gone down, my room was filled with that peculiarly thick, still blackness which comes after twelve o'clock.

I raised my head and listened.

It sounded like a heavy body being dragged over the floor. There was a sound of struggle, of shuffling feet.

I switched on my light and jumped out of bed just as the door burst open and five men half-fell into my room tugging along a furious sixth—Mint Collins.

They were all dishevelled, all somewhat the worse for drink, all, except Mint, appeared to be enjoying themselves hugely.

DuVal was in the lead.

"There!"

He pointed triumphantly to me, standing in my thin silk nightgown too thunderstruck to be quite conscious of what was happening.

"Can you beat that, Allen?"

"What does this mean?" I asked indignantly.

"You needn't get mad about it," DuVal remarked pettishly. "I'm defending your reputation as a beauty, my dear. Allen's made the statement that his wife's best

looking. I say mine. First we inspect mine—then his. Mint's the judge." He leered wickedly at me. "We decided Mint would be impartial judge!"

"Get out of my room this instant, you drunken—swine," I commanded in a voice that trembled with fury.

"Gretchen! I wouldn't have had this happen for the world," Mint exclaimed, trying in vain to free himself from the hold of the others. "By God, Archer, we've been friends a long time, but this is going a little too far: When you invite me here and then drag me in to witness you insulting your wife, I'm through, do you hear? . . . Let go my arm," he finished, wrestling wildly with Allen and Dave Cumberland who were clinging to him on one side.

My wrath and Mint's outburst had somewhat sobered the crowd. Their resistance was only half-hearted.

"Now," Mint cried, waving his right arm around in a circle, "clear out of here—every last one of you, or I'll fight you, one at the time or all together. . . Clear out, do you hear?"

They went, sheepishly, crestfallen. Little Mr. Cumberland lagged behind the others.

"I hope you'll excuse us, Mrs. Archer," he said. "It was just by way of being a little joke. . . . I don't know what Mrs. Cumberland will say when she hears it," he added nervously as an afterthought.

DuVal stood at the foot of my bed. At Mint's words he had turned very pale, but he had not spoken.

"I suppose you're satisfied with your work," he now

said coldly, "you've turned the best friend I ever had against me."

"Suppose you wait until you are sober to discuss what we each have done," I suggested.

"So you think I'm drunk!" He laughed bitterly. "I wish I were. Then I might not mind so much what I've found out tonight."

"Oh, no, I'm not drunk," he continued as I made no reply. "At least, not too drunk to know that there's something between you and Mint Collins."

"Between me and Mint Collins," I cried, surprised out of my stony indifference.

"Oh, you act the innocent well, but it doesn't go, my dear! Yes, *you and Mint Collins!* Does it surprise you that your doddering old husband has eyes to see? Do you think I don't know that you met him in town last week when you were supposed to be shopping? You wonder how I found out, don't you? Well, I called at his office and they said Mr. Collins had 'phoned that he would not be down that day!"

So that was what he had been suspecting! And the day I was in town, must have been the day Mint and Marjorie went to Connecticut!

"You needn't stand there looking like an injured angel—I've simply been cleverer than you, so you might as well take your medicine," DuVal burst out brutally. "When I brought him in here to-night, his actions gave me the final proof—you've schemed, and so have I! . . . I understand now your devotion to your dear friend, Marjorie. She was very convenient, wasn't she, when

you wanted to arrange meetings, and keep me in the dark! And to think that I suspected her of being the cause of Mint's trouble! . . . I apologize to Marjorie. I might have known she would be above that sort of thing. Marjorie is a lady!"

"And now, you will kindly leave my room," I said, interrupting for the first time the torrent of abuse he had been pouring on me.

"Your room?"

He seated himself on my bed with maddening deliberation.

"I haven't tired of you quite as quickly as Collins has, so I think I shall stay in *my* room a while longer."

"Oh—you—you," I began, almost speechless with anger, unable to find a term sufficiently scathing to express my contempt.

As always, the sight of my impotent rage seemed to relieve his emotion. He laughed softly.

"You can't keep your lovers, and you can't get rid of your husband—awkward, isn't it?"

"But I can leave," I retorted, going swiftly towards the door.

DuVal sprang ahead of me and caught my wrists.

"Oh, no, you can't, because I choose for you to remain!"

Resistance was useless; his fingers held me like steel vises. His eyes mocked me with an insane light in their depths. I noticed with detached interest that the pupils were elongated, like a cat's in the daytime.

"Who would ever suspect that those clear eyes could hide so many plotting thoughts," he jeered. "That suc-

fair skin could cover a naughty, intriguing heart! But crudely done, my dear, very crudely. You were not tutored at Versailles!"

"You—vile—monster," I ground out between tight-shut teeth . . . "you—you dog! No, not that. For dogs at least are decent."

"But I, too, can be decent! See how lovingly I embrace you! How warm my kisses are!"

"Let me go," I gasped, "or——"

"Or what!"

A minute longer he held me, laughing in my face, then pushed me from him with such violence that I staggered and almost fell.

"Bah! What a fuss to make over a hundred and ten pounds of bone and white flesh, with a few well-assorted features thrown in! Two men savoring hell for—you! Get to sleep. God knows, I won't prevent you."

He flung himself contemptuously out of the room.

My first impulse was to pray. I turned out the light and knelt at the open window, looking out into the black immensity of the night. My lips framed words—words of humble supplication. But they were not uttered.

Some iron strain of pride brought me to my feet.

"I'm damned if I do," I cried. "I'll not come whining to *You*. You are a man—you'd probably like for me to grovel before you, but I shan't. I made my bed, and I'll lie in it. I've tried to do right, and it's brought me here. So now I'll do what I must. I won't come whining to you. I'm not afraid of you and your hell. . . . You

can't break me. I'm not a quitter, God," I ended half-sobbing.

My defiance gave me strength and courage. I dressed quietly; quietly, but with feverish haste, packed one small bag. Saw that I had quite a good deal of money in my purse, and just as the first pale streaks of dawn were showing in the sky, I took one last look about the room where I had lived, not unhappily, for nearly a year. As I opened the door, my eye fell on the Christ. A thought occurred to me.

I came softly back into the room and drawing off my wedding ring I placed it on the statue's thorn-crowned brow, where it made a bright, golden halo.

BOOK FIVE

I

I do not remember the incidents of that morning very clearly. I remember walking to the nearest drug store and ordering a taxi. I remember the ride into New York as a nightmare of slowness (though in reality we made excellent time) with me urging the driver to hurry—hurry!

My dominating thought was the necessity for haste. Why, I do not know. DuVal could hardly have followed and dragged me back by force. My mind was made up, and no pleas of his could move me now. I think I was fleeing from the possibility of another sight of him—from the emotional strain of a scene.

"Where to, Mrs. Archer?" the driver asked as we entered Riverside Drive.

"Where —," I repeated blankly.

"Where do you want to go?"

"Oh, anywhere—Grand Central Station," I answered at random, indifferent to the man's curious glances.

But his question brought home to me the fact that I had no plans. Nor did I care. Yet it was necessary for me to decide on a place to stay, if only temporarily.

As I paid the fare and went into the station restaurant for a cup of coffee, a thought occurred to me, delightfully,

blessedly definite in the confusion of my mind. I would go to that hotel where I had spent my first night in New York—that hotel where one was so very safe.

Again I wanted to be safe. To lull my soul back to health in security.

When I had drunk my coffee and nibbled at a slice of toast, I walked along the clean-washed streets to the Avenue and caught a 'bus. I should have liked to walk, but my bag was too heavy.

The kind-eyed woman who had befriended me four years ago was gone, but in spite of my disappointment at this, the unpretentious little hotel seemed almost like home.

I went to my room and to bed, for I had had practically no sleep the night before.

Over and over my tired brain revolved the incidents leading up to my flight.

One thought persisted because of its incongruity.

In all his suspicions of innocent people, and harmless incidents, DuVal had never once asked me what had happened that day in the Unlimited's offices while he was waiting for me.

II

For three days I hid away in my room at the hotel, luxuriating in its seclusion and in my new-found sense of peace. I imagined that I had at last grown calm, that my questioning and search had ended forever.

"This is better," I told myself, "than any reality—because now I do not feel. I am dead, yet alive. What

could be more desirable? To find the meaning of life in hot baths, in food, in sunshine and long hours of sleep!"

I was quite convinced for three days that I was beyond the reach of pain or desire or any sensation other than the purely bodily one of animal content.

"Nothing that can happen will matter," I thought. "They can't get at me any longer. I am dead!"

A smiling arrogance of spirit possessed me. Had I not defied God and man and all the forces of nature with impunity? I was I, Gretchen May. Weak—yet stronger than all these combined, because I did not care what became of me. Self-concern was gone, seeking was gone, ambition and rebellion had departed forever, I said. There was left only a great confidence, a ruthlessness, that I would be myself—that nothing could break me, nor divorce me again from my soul.

At the bottom of my consciousness, I realized that I could not go on living at the hotel indefinitely. I had not enough money. I knew that I should have to do something—worst of all, that I should have to decide what to do. But these concerns were not sufficiently definite to disturb my dream-like existence, for three days.

On the morning of the fourth day, however, there came a change. I looked from my window and saw people hurrying to work. Automobiles zoomed by. There was an autumn crispness in the air.

Suddenly I wanted to go out—to walk for hours along these hard, solid streets—to throw back my shoulders and drink in the sun drenched air until my head reeled—to grow tired—to be jostled by indifferent male and

female creatures—to feel the nearness of humanity and, yes, to smell the good, human smells!

Oddly enough, as I walked swiftly up the Avenue, I found myself repeating the Apostles' Creed.

"I believe in the Holy Ghost," I murmured, passing a florist's window bright with asters and reddening leaves; "the holy Catholic Church; the Communion of Saints; The Forgiveness of Sins; The Resurrection of the Body; And the Life Everlasting."

I repeated the words mechanically. It was as if some one else took control of me and uttered them. They did not seem to have significance.

My mood was one of quiet exaltation. I observed and relished everything, but seemed still to be outside the world.

I turned down Thirty-Ninth Street and walked over to Broadway.

A dress in the window of a little shop caught my attention. I stopped to look at it, and then all thoughts of dresses were blotted out, for in one corner of the window was a signed photograph of Madeline Montrose.

At the sight of her smiling face, hatred and resentment rushed over me anew.

"Oh you—you wicked woman," I cried softly. "It's because of you that I'm where I am. But I know how to take the smile from your face, and I'll do it, too!"

I struck the plate glass a great blow with my fist. The sound brought me to my senses. I looked around to see if any one had observed me, but it was still very early, and the few people out were too intent on their business to

waste time in watching a well-dressed woman beat on shop windows.

I turned away quickly and retraced my steps, but the storm within me had not subsided. "The Resurrection of the Body," that much at least of the creed I believed in. For I who had been dead was now alive. The old unquiet again filled my breast. I had arisen to hatred and vengeful thoughts.

As I passed Tiffany's on the way back to my hotel, a grey limousine was drawn up to the curb. The door opened and a woman stepped out, almost colliding with me.

"I beg your pardon," she apologized, and then beamed unexpectedly. "Why, it's Miss Montrose! How do you do?"

She extended a white-gloved hand.

An indignant denial was on my lips, but I checked it in time. Why not be Madeline Montrose? She had played at being me for a while. It might be interesting.

"I don't believe you remember me," the woman went on, looking at me keenly. "I'm Mrs. J. Wortham Harris, and I met you at one of Jack Binford's teas last winter."

"Of course," I said smiling.

"I've been trying to get in touch with you ever since, but you famous people are so frightfully elusive! . . . You haven't forgotten your promise to dine with us, I hope? We've been looking forward so eagerly to having you."

"Indeed, I haven't," I protested, "it would be delightful."

I had already classified this nervous, richly-dressed woman before me as an inveterate lion hunter.

Again a keen, fluttery survey of me. I could almost see her thoughts scurrying back and forth. Should she, or should she not? Some important decision was evidently being made.

"Why not come out to-night," she suggested daringly. "I know it's frightfully late to ask you, but, if by any chance, you haven't an engagement, I should be so glad to have you come. . . ."

"As it happens," I replied, "I ran into town for a few days without letting any one know. . . . Just for a chance to be alone—you know . . . !"

"Indeed I do," Mrs. Harris exclaimed hastily, "and it's terrible that you should meet me and be bothered with invitations."

"Oh, but I've had almost enough of solitude," I laughed. "I'd be very glad to come, Mrs. Harris."

"That is splendid," she cried, beaming delightedly again. "Shall I send for you, then, about six? We're still at our place on Long Island."

"Thank you very much. I'm staying at a funny little hotel under an assumed name, so I must ask you not to give away the secret of my whereabouts. If the reporters and interviewers discover me, my chance for a rest will be gone forever," I laughed, as I gave her my address.

That charmed Mrs. Harris.

It was simply a shame the public nagged me so, and wasn't it romantic to live under an assumed name, and she'd send Willis for me at six o'clock, and was inexpres-

sibly grateful to me for being sweet enough to come on such short notice!

She looked overjoyed at the good fortune that had befallen her, and was reluctant to let me go. I think she was afraid of losing me, and would have liked to pack me into the limousine then and there, but even she could not quite find courage to suggest such a course.

However, I finally got away on the plea of an urgent engagement. A few blocks farther down the street and I remembered that I had no evening clothes with me. This was an unforeseen obstacle. For a while I saw nothing to do but run back and beg off from the dinner party. Then I remembered that, as DuVal's wife, I had an account at one of the big department stores. Why should I not buy things there? Surely I was due that much compensation for what I had endured on his account! When I left home, I had made out a check to him for the remainder of the sum he had deposited to my credit. That was really mine, but I had relinquished it. Now, however, I would swallow my pride and charge to his account the clothes necessary to undertake this adventure.

How it would end, I could not foretell. But I wanted to go. I wanted for a few hours to taste the fruits of Madeline Montrose's success. And, at that time, to want anything was with me sufficient reason for doing it.

III

THE Harris' house was a great pile of stone, palatial in its proportions and appointments.

At the front, extending down to the sea of which one caught enticing blue glimpses from the verandahs, were the formal gardens, very much like all formal gardens but on a scale of magnificence that was a revelation to me. Back of the house rose thickly wooded hills whose dark green provided a striking frame for the dazzling "Villa Alba," as Mrs. Harris had somewhat unimaginatively named the place.

The Harris family belonged to that group of mushroom millionaires who owe their wealth to oil.

She was preoccupied with giving the impression of having always been accustomed to her present style of living, but Mr. Harris retained a naïveté in the midst of his luxurious surroundings that was as charming to others as it was annoying to his wife.

I liked him at once. He was a big man with tousled, sun-burned hair and a pair of boyish eyes, the bluest I ever saw. His skin was tanned to the color of an Indian's, and he had not been rich long enough to have lost the effects of a sturdy outdoor life.

When I arrived it was not yet quite dark. Mr. Harris insisted on showing the place to me.

"You'll tire Miss Montrose, Jim," his wife objected. "Perhaps she doesn't want to browse around."

"Oh, but I do—I'd love it."

"Miss Montrose's not one of your hot house plants. I knew it the minute I clapped eyes on her," Mr. Harris said triumphantly.

Mrs. Harris declined to go. She must give a few orders to the servants, she explained.

We wandered through the grounds for twenty or thirty minutes, Mr. Harris eagerly drinking in my enthusiastic praise, pointing pridefully now and then to a bed of flowers, a piece of statuary—or taking me to the exact spot where the best view was to be had.

“You know,” he began diffidently as we started back to the house, “I was scared to death when Mary said you were coming. From what she told me, I was sure you’d be stuck up. I’m real glad we got acquainted. You don’t seem a bit like a movie actress, Miss Montrose. . . .”

We stopped for a minute on the verandah and looked out over the gardens, now suggestive of unreality in the rapidly gathering dusk. The great clumps of shrubbery were monstrous silhouettes, the trees might have been mythical giants. There was a sadness, a fatefulness about the scene that reminded me of the enchanted gardens of my fairy tales.

From the brightly lighted house came sounds of talk and laughter.

“They’ve got here,” Mr. Harris groaned. “You mustn’t think I’m not glad to have company, Miss Montrose,” he added hastily, “but most of these people Mary likes are so eternally queer! The women seem more like men, and the men are reg’lar sissies, most of ’em—I’ve got a lot of things I never had before,” he indicated the house and the grounds in a sweeping gesture, “but sometimes I’d be willing to give it all up for the old way of living. . . . You can understand how I feel, Miss Montrose. It’s like you’d been playing a part in a picture

for so long that you'd most forgotten what your real self was like. And you wanted to quit play-actin' and get acquainted with yourself again. . . .!"

"Then why," I began.

"Mary likes this," he explained simply, "and I guess I can't do anything better than make Mary happy—One good thing about these fellers, though," he ended on a more hopeful note, "they don't turn down liquor ever, even if it is enough to make you blush to see the way they doctor good stuff with fizz and fruit juice."

Mrs. Harris came fluttering up excitedly when we went in.

"I declare, I was getting worried about you! Has he walked you to death, Miss Montrose?"

Without waiting for an answer, she began introducing me to the people present. There were three women, who left no impression at all because one's attention never went beyond their clothes and jewelry, and four men—prosperous business types.

"Mr. Haynes, Mr. Ayres, Mr. Ralph—but you know Harry Baldwin," Mrs. Harris ended beamingly.

So I knew Harry Baldwin! That was awkward. I wondered how well I knew Harry Baldwin.

I thought, but could not be certain, that there was a mocking, ironic gleam in his eyes as he bowed to me.

"You told me your vacation was over," he remarked when the business of formalities was finished.

"So it was, two months ago," I answered smilingly, certain of my ground for the time being.

He looked puzzled.

"And you haven't started work yet on a new picture," he persisted.

I stole a glance at him from under my lashes. His face was pleasantly interested. It was impossible to tell whether or not he had seen through my pretense.

"Do you mind if I don't discuss it?" I parried. "You know how we *artistes* feel about our work, Mr. Baldwin!"

"Mr. Baldwin," he cried reproachfully. "I thought we agreed long ago to be plain Harry and Madeline to each other!"

"Forgive me, Harry," I amended with a sinking sensation about my heart. Apparently I knew Mr. Baldwin very well indeed. Heaven knew, what complications would arise. I was never meant for an intriguer, I told myself furiously. I always gave myself away. But I'd see this through—brazen it out—in spite of Fate and this big, smiling man beside me. I studied him furtively.

Everything about him proclaimed the practical man, from the round, well-shaped head to the strong, square hands. Here was no dreamer, nor fanaticist. Honest, well-balanced, healthy in mind as in body. . . . There was power in his face, intense self-confidence, nothing to indicate an introspective turn of mind. One would always know where he stood, I felt. There was no baffling feminine element to confuse one's calculations about him. I rather thought he would not give me away. . . . However . . .

A butler came in with cocktails. I noticed that my hand was trembling as I raised the glass to my lips. After a third, however, I felt my self-assurance returning

and a hint of that beatific state I had experienced for three days—an epic disregard for consequences.

I surveyed the room with cool, critical eyes. Mrs. Harris, her dress just a shade too elaborate, her jewels just a thought too splendid for good taste, fluttered in and out among her guests with a slight pucker of anxiety on her brow. She was one of those women who can never leave people to their own devices. She made her guests miserable with superfluous attentions. Mr. Harris had effaced himself after our entrance. I caught fleeting glimpses of him during the evening, solemnly emptying tall glasses of rye which he preferred to the “sissies” cocktails, but that was all. He resolutely left Mary to do the honors.

Dinner was announced at seven-thirty. Harry Baldwin took me in, but to my great relief he contented himself with chatting of inconsequential things. Indeed, he was so discreet that I decided my fears had been groundless.

I had quite regained my customary poise when we went back to the drawing room.

Bridge was suggested, but there was a not very enthusiastic response, for which I was grateful. I played a miserable game and had no desire to lose at cards the sum of money that remained to me.

For a while conversation was general. Then one of the women, a Mrs. Ramseur whom every one, except Mr. Harris, addressed as Vivian, sat down at the grand piano and began playing and singing.

Her voice was a rich contralto with a seductive, melancholy undertone that reminded me of DuVal.

The music and the wine I had drunk during dinner combined to produce in me a wistful, dreamy sadness. I saw that Mr. Harris wiped his eyes stealthily from time to time. All of us seemed more or less affected except Mrs. Harris. Her quick glances kept darting everywhere to assure herself that we were not bored.

Mrs. Ramseur ended on a lighter note—The Gypsy Trail, I think. She had hardly left the piano before our hostess had rung for champagne.

“A toast to Miss Montrose,” she suggested brightly when the bottles had been brought. The party was distinctly too quiet. She must liven up things a bit.

I had not drunk champagne since that night on the lake-shore with Jake. Nor had I been able to so much as look at it without paling because of the associations it conjured up.

Now I laughed, strangely, I fear, for Harry Baldwin shot a quick look at me.

“Yes,” I cried, beside myself, “let us drink champagne which suits me as no other drink except perhaps benedictine, and that is a little—heavy! I will drink champagne in spite of my school-girl’s eyes to Madeline Montrose’s undying success!”

“To Madeline Montrose’s undying success,” the others echoed gamely, concealing their astonishment at this unconventional procedure.

The wine bit gently into my throat as I drained the thin glass.

Harry Baldwin’s drink remained untouched.

“Why aren’t you drinking,” I demanded petulantly.

For answer he smiled at me, gravely, intimately as an old friend.

"I'll drink to my own toast," he replied.

The glasses were filled again.

"To you," said Harry Baldwin gently, and I knew then that he knew.

The knowledge only seemed to make me more reckless. What did I care? I was in a seventh heaven of exhilaration. So were we all. Even Mrs. Harris soon forgot her customary rôle, and slipped into picturesque western colloquialisms.

Jim Harris, sitting out of the circle, construed the toasts as good excuse for additional glasses of straight whiskey. I remember being very much worried as I saw him drinking steadily.

"You mustn't do that," I called to him.

For answer he waved his hand paternally with a twinkle in his blue eyes.

"Don't you worry your head about an old timer like me," he admonished gaily.

"I like you, Jim Harris," I called back which caused the others to roar with laughter and embarrassed him so that he ducked his tousled head precipitately into his glass and drained it at a gulp.

There were toasts drunk to every one present—to our friends—to the President of the United States—and I forget how many more. The long necked bottles disappeared one by one and were replaced from a seemingly inexhaustible source.

A tendency to pair off became apparent. Vivian

Ramseur and Ayres had already drifted away to another room. Miss Fielding was casting languishing glances at Mr. Haynes.

Harry Baldwin slipped up to me.

"Come out on the verandah," he urged, "and watch the moon with me!"

He went up to Mrs. Harris and seemed to be making a request for she nodded assent after a questioning glance at me.

I trailed out of the room magnificently, my green dress slashing silkily about my ankles, my head held very high. The wine only seemed to have made my brain acutely keen. That sense of impending revelation which I had felt once or twice before was strong within me. There was a ringing in my ears like the chime of a hundred silvery bells. I now know that it was the drink, but at the time it impressed me as a part of my mystical experience.

The gardens were magically bathed with moonlight, the sea showed as a darkly glittering expanse belted by the white road.

Harry Baldwin lit a cigarette matter of factly, unimpressed by the unearthly beauty at which we gazed. The glare of the match threw his face into strong relief. His masculinity delighted me.

He tossed the match away, and puffed for a while in silence.

"Who are you?" he asked at last in a low tone, without looking at me.

"I'm the unhappiest woman in the world," I answered slowly.

"Perhaps," he yielded, "but what is her name? Not Madeline Montrose, because I had dinner with her last night and she left this morning for an outlandish place where they're taking some big scenes. Besides," he went on warmly, triumphantly, "Madeline Montrose has a tiny black mole on her left shoulder just here," he touched me with a strong blunt finger, "and your white shoulders are irreproachable. . . . There's no such thing as an absolutely perfect double."

"Maybe I had the mole removed early this morning and stayed over a day longer to recuperate . . ."

"All right," he said good-humoredly, "have it your own way. But since you won't tell me who you are, shall I tell you?"

He leaned very close to me, holding me with his eyes.

"Your name is Geraldine Grey, and you were dropped by the Unlimited Film Company for some reason you do not know. Shall I tell you why?—The International, fearing for Miss Montrose's popularity, arranged with your company to pay a sum of money, oh, quite a large sum, to have you quietly eliminated. I learned all that last night from your charming but unscrupulous prototype!"

So Mr. Grimble had not been worsted after all. Grudging admiration for his craftiness mingled with my distaste. I was tickled by the thought of his complacency when he pocketed the International's check. Mr. Grimble was very clever—like Herman May, he would go far because he let no weak scruples restrain him. The whole sordid scheme stood revealed to me—the interview with

Montrose, his offer to withdraw me before a contract was signed if she would come in and finish the picture—the pretended generosity of his agreement with the International—the fat check for shoving off the bird who had already flown! Ah, that was good business!

“And what are you doing now, Geraldine?” Harry Baldwin continued when I did not speak. “It isn’t easy to get engagements even with such a face as yours—there’s professional jealousy! Your money has been dribbling away while your anxiety has increased. Finally, chance puts in your way this opportunity of playing Madeline Montrose—you’re an actress, a little desperate, a great deal bitter—and you accept!”

Harry Baldwin was quietly elated at the way he had pieced together the threads of my supposed story. And, since he had it all worked out so well, why should I disillusion him?

“Yes,” I responded, “I’m Geraldine Grey, or, rather, Gretchen May.”

“You shouldn’t go around pretending to be Madeline,” he chided me. “It’s not fair to yourself. You’re much nicer than she is—but you haven’t told me what you are doing now.”

I faced him defiantly.

“Nothing at all.”

“Now, listen here, Gretchen,” he began and then hesitated.

Suddenly he flung away his cigarette and caught me roughly to him, pressed hard relentless kisses on my

mouth—held me close to his strong body that was so unequivocal, so sure!

“There,” he cried, breathing like a spent runner. “What’s the use of talk, I’m going to take you home with me, Gretchen!”

His passion infected me. My breast rose and fell stormily. I wanted to weep.

“Do you hear,” he repeated tensely. “I’m going to take you home with me!”

How everything was arranged! It was Fate. I was filled with a mild and childlike wonder that things should have been arranged so for me. Now I should not have to decide what to do. However, in spite of the state I was in, my inherent caution made its voice heard—faint, it is true, but unmistakable.

“But,” I began hesitatingly.

“Haven’t I told you there’s no use of talk?” Harry Baldwin interrupted with good-natured impatience. “I’ll not listen to any ‘buts’ . . . I’m going to take you home with me, Gretchen!”

That settled it. I would as soon have thought of disagreeing as of dashing out my brains on the stone railing of the verandah. I mustn’t have any weak scruples. What was it . . . ? I couldn’t seem to think clearly. . . . But Mr. Grimble and Herman May would have advised me to do this, I was sure.

“I think I should like to go home with you,” I told him slowly. “You’re so nice and—usual! I don’t believe you would give me ivory Christs that I hated, or keep a lot of daggers and things that you made love to.”

Harry Baldwin laughed, a great booming sound with an undercurrent of repressed excitement in it.

"You adorable baby," he exclaimed, kissing me again, "of course, I shouldn't!"

"But tell me something," I begged, fearful again, trying to see into the very depths of his soul, "are you jealous?"

He laughed again.

"I should say not. I haven't time. 'The world is so full of a number of things,' you know . . ."

"I know," I rejoined happily, "that's Stevenson."

"Get your coat," Harry Baldwin commanded now in a tone of brusque affection. "Mrs. Harris said I might drive you to town, if you were willing. Let's go, what do you say?"

The August moon hung like a great gold plate in the sky, the silence—odorous with the scent of flowering shrubs—pressed close to me like a fragrant garment, the white road along the sea seemed to beckon: Come, Gretchen. Come!

"I'll go with you," I whispered to the looming shadow by my side.

IV

I AWOKE next day to surges of pain. Holding my throbbing temples tight between my hands, I sat up in bed and looked around the lurching room bewilderedly.

The shades were drawn. That was queer. I always raised them to the top of the windows at night. . . . Gradually the rocking of the floor subsided. The furniture steadied itself.

This was not my room at the hotel! Where was I?

My green evening dress hung limply over the back of a chair with my neatly folded underclothes beside it.

The bureau and chiffonier were covered with a man's silver-backed toilet articles. Over the foot rail of the bed was flung a quilted dressing gown of thin purple silk. The pillow beside me still held the imprint of a head.

Recollection came bit by bit, and with it such a wave of self-loathing that I thought it would choke me.

I jumped out of bed, almost screaming at the pain the effort caused me. The room began its dizzy revolving again, but I gritted my teeth, determined not to yield. Presently things stood still once more, and I could remove my hands from my head.

There was a long mirror in a door in front of me, and, if I had not been so miserable, I should have laughed at my comical reflection.

I was wearing a pair of men's pajamas, so voluminous that I was quite lost in their folds. The sleeves were rolled above my elbows, but the long trousers hung in a terraced expanse of wrinkles, covering all my feet but the toes. My hair was a flaming mass of disorder. In the paper white of my face, my eyes looked like great holes burnt in a blanket.

My mouth was dry and felt as if it were lined with fur. There was a pitcher of iced water on a little stand. I poured out a glassful and drank it eagerly, then sat down on the bed to consider what to do.

The dinner at Villa Alba—the cocktails—the wine during dinner—the champagne afterward—Harry Baldwin

—our talk on the verandah. . . . The whole procession of events passed before me kaleidoscopically.

Only one thing was certain: I must get out of this place as quickly as possible—away from Harry Baldwin. Where was he?

I slipped out of the absurd pajamas and began to dress. Then I remembered. I had nothing with me but the clothes I had worn the night before. I could not go on the streets in the day-time clad in evening dress and silver slippers! I sank down on the bed with a groan of utter despair.

There was a discreet knock on the door.

Spurred to action, I wrapped myself frenziedly in the purple dressing gown.

“What is it?” I inquired guardedly.

The door opened about four inches and a little yellow hand bearing a glass was pushed through.

“Mr. Baldwin ordered me to give this to madame when she awoke,” explained a carefully modulated male voice from the other side. “It is Bro-mo Sel-zer. It will be good for madame. One pours in water and stirs.”

“Where is Mr. Baldwin?” I asked, taking the proffered glass.

“He went away at lunch time. He said that he would return to take madame for dinner.”

“What time is it now?”

“I will see.”

“It is a half past five o’clock, madame,” the grave, respectful voice replied.

"Half-past five," I exclaimed in consternation. "In the evening?"

"In the evening."

There was not a hint of amusement in the tone of that admirable servant. "The bath is adjoined," he added, and then closed the door noiselessly.

I took the foaming drink after which I felt more able to cope with the situation. But first, I must dress. I did not want Harry Baldwin to return and find me in his bedroom.

A cold bath and a vigorous rub afterward did much to complete my cure. By the time I had fastened the last snapper of my dress there was nothing to indicate my recent indisposition except that furry feel of my mouth and a tendency on the part of the floor to glide away from me unless I walked carefully.

I opened the door through which the servant had talked to me and found myself in a sitting room that I dimly recalled having seen before.

I sat down in a huge, over-stuffed chair and resolutely brought the poor fragments of my mind to bear on the problem at hand.

The first thing that crashed upon me, and beyond which I seemed not to be able to get was this: I had gone home with a man whom I had known only four or five hours—had slept with him.

The fact of my condition only made it the more shameful. That I was attracted by Harry Baldwin in a way that my husband had never attracted me was no excuse.

I must face the bald truth of my action, unadorned by any sentimental frills.

This I had done. Now what should I do with it?

My meditations were interrupted by the silent entrance of a little Chinese man bearing a tea tray.

He moved a table near me, set down the tray, and, without having glanced at me once, departed as silently as he had come.

I stopped him before he reached the door.

He turned and looked at me, not a flicker of expression in his shoe-button eyes. There was something timeless in the patient, mask-like face. He comforted me, this mysterious yellow man, as one is comforted by mountains, or ancient rocks, or the sea.

"What is your name?" I asked him.

"Wong, madame," he replied.

"That is all. Thank you, Wong."

He bowed deeply and disappeared.

V

SIPPING the pale, fragrant tea that Wong had brought me, I thought with yearning regret of my quiet days at the little hotel when I had believed I was dead.

It was a lie, a cruel lie, behind which my desires had hid themselves and gained strength until the time came when they could rush forth and shatter my peace forever.

Peace . . . ! That was what I wanted more than anything in the world. But there was a part of me that forbade it. I wanted the peace of the aged, of the dead.

But I was young and alive with instincts that clamored for satisfaction. The two would not be reconciled.

Last night I had rendered to Caesar—to-day I must render to God. But there was no distinguishing between what belonged to each.

“Don’t be an idiot, Gretchen,” something said within me, “you’ve done what you’ve done. No use to cry over spilt milk. Besides, there was Grimble—and DuVal—you know!”

I recognized the smooth logic of Herman May in those words. Ah, he knew how to distinguish! But there was another voice, an implacable, plaintive voice, that would have its say:

“You were not forced to this step, Gretchen. It was lust—and champagne—that brought you here. You have sinned!”

Back and forth they fought for my soul: my father and my mother.

I had thought that her thin protests had been stilled forever on the night of Jake’s death, but she had persisted in me, stronger than I ever would have dreamed. Yet, Herman May was stronger. . . . And neither was I.

Leaning back wearily in the big chair, spent with the struggle, I tasted again the sweetness of incorruptible individuality.

“No, I am I. Neither *your* expediency, nor *your* fearful cringing can dominate me. I do what I must. I suffer what is necessary. But I will not be blinded to the truth of what I do, nor will I suffer needlessly. . . . My surrender last night was an escape, just as my surrenders

to Grumble and DuVal were escapes. But I am not sure that the alternative in any case would have been easier to bear—or better. Because my body is pleased with Harry Baldwin, is that a reason for denying my body? My marriage to DuVal was the greater evil, because there was not even the excuse of desire for living with him. He treated me as a mistress—well, if I am to be a man's mistress, it is right that I should be pleased with the man. . . . Something had to be done. I could not go on forever at the hotel. Is it better to sell oneself to a corporation for twenty dollars a week, or to a man? . . . Thanks to you, Herman May, I have nothing to bargain with but my body. Thanks to you, I demand the greatest price for what I have to sell. But no thanks to you—or *you*, that I shall keep my real self inviolate whatever I may have to do!"

At a quarter to seven, Harry Baldwin burst into the room and found me sitting in the big chair with a smile on my lips.

"Gee, but I've had a day of it," he cried, kissing me emphatically. "How are you, Gretchen? Did Wong look after you? When I left you were sleeping like a top!"

"I suppose you know that I'd had too much to drink last night—I didn't know—I've never been—(I hesitated over the shameful word and then brought it out bravely) drunk before."

"Oh, sure," Harry Baldwin disposed of my explanation cheerfully. "We were all mixing 'em a little recklessly. No harm done, though, unless—you aren't sorry, are you, Gretchen?"

"I was at first, but I'm not now."

"Fine! I didn't dare count on you, but I wanted to do my share so that, if you decided to stay, it would be ready for you. I've been apartment hunting all day, Gretchen, and I've found a peach of a place. You'll be crazy about it!"

It was impossible to resist the infectious enthusiasm in his voice.

"Where?" I asked eagerly, in spite of myself.

"On the Drive—but just you wait till you see it! I'll take you over after dinner."

"But I must go back to the hotel and——"

"I've done all that," he interrupted. "Your bag's there and we can get a trunk and some things for you to-morrow."

"How did you know where I was staying?" I wondered.

"You told me last night—don't you remember?"

I shook my head, ashamed to admit the truth.

Harry Baldwin laughed.

"You were so darned funny and—sweet, Gretchen! You've made a new man of me already. I'm a fool about you—you know that, don't you? . . . I'm forty years old, Gretchen. There've been women, of course, loads of 'em. . . . But I've never felt about anybody like I feel about you. . . . Let's go to get some dinner," he broke off as if ashamed of his display of feeling.

While we ate, I told Harry Baldwin about DuVal and my running away. I did not want to deceive him. Perhaps, too, there was in my telling some idea of raising myself in his estimation. I did not like the rôle of a dis-

carded film actress. "That's why I haven't a trunk," I ended somewhat irrelevantly.

"The low-down dog," he muttered when I had finished. "Don't think about it any more than you can help. . . . And I'll promise you one thing, Gretchen, I'll always give you a square deal!"

It was after nine when we reached the big apartment house where I was to begin my new life.

Harry Baldwin gave me the key and watched my face excitedly as we went from room to room. There were five rooms and two baths. A living room and bedroom facing the Drive, and back of these, with windows on the side street, dining room, kitchen and servant's room.

From the living room windows I looked out on the black, enigmatic river with its freight of lighted ships plying up and down—back and forth.

They fascinated me. I could have stood there and watched them for hours, but Harry Baldwin was waiting for me to speak.

"Like it, Gretchen?" he asked.

DuVal had asked me the same question not quite a year ago!

"Yes, Harry, I like it. . . . I'll stay here, stay with you."

Harry Baldwin took me in his arms.

"There's one thing more," he said. "I'm going to give you Wong."

VI

THAT day was characteristic of Harry Baldwin. He was essentially the man of action. He could make and

execute a decision while most people were occupied with getting the facts of the case.

His panacea for all bodily and spiritual ills was: Let's do something—see a show, go for a drive, give a party.

His enthusiasm for life was boundless. Each day was a new and glorious challenge. One would think that forty years of it would have left him a little jaded. I was only twenty-two when I went to live with him. Yet already I was asking a trifle wearily what it was all about.

Harry was a self-made man. Perhaps, that accounted for it. At the time when most people are getting their experience, he had been grinding away at his job—pushing ahead to success—with never a thought that life might hold other interests than silk mills. He was a prodigiously hard worker. Even when I met him he spent three fourths of his time attending to business in and out of town, although he might have retired, if he had wished.

His disposition affected me like a bracing tonic. For a long time I was happy with Harry Baldwin—happier than I had been with DuVal, in every respect but one. The irregularity of our relation made friendships impossible, except with the type of people for whom I did not care. Even at the worst with DuVal, there had been Marjorie. Now I had cut myself away from the possibility of knowing women like herself—I had cut myself away from her. That was the hardest thing. I dare say she would have understood, if I had written her (she was tolerant enough of others) but I could not bring myself to do it. It would be unfair, I felt. I knew that Marjorie

loved me, and I wanted to keep that memory as a perfect thing.

I suppose I was too proud and too fearful that she might judge me harshly. Whatever the reason, I never wrote, although I often imagined long talks between us, and for a time set down my thoughts in a sort of journal that was meant for Marjorie's eyes alone.

My life in the fifth floor apartment had settled rapidly into a routine as monotonous and respectable as if I had been legally married. Wong was a combined cook, maid, laundress, butler and mother to me. At Harry's suggestion that I should have another servant to assist him, he looked so forlorn that I vetoed the idea. Wong watched over me with a slavish concern that was never obtrusive. The little man loved me almost from the first, I am sure, although he never has understood me, quite. There was a bond of some sort between us, intangible, but very real.

For more than a year I was contented to live in my senses. All the time, I suppose, my mind had been groping and growing, but so secretly that I was not aware of having a mind at all—until one morning I awoke discontentedly in my sun-flooded room and realized that I was not satisfied any longer. The old, aching urge had returned stronger than ever.

We were giving a party that night. Harry had a great many friends of different types, but they were all sufficiently tolerant to overlook the unconventionality of our life together—quite willing to spend an evening in my apartment, although I was never invited to their homes. Harry was very rich, and I have observed that

wealth has the effect of broadening people's minds to an astonishing degree.

I always dreaded these parties, though I would not have admitted it to Harry for the world. He took an enormous pleasure in bedecking me with expensive gowns and jewels and showing me off.

The people would come drifting in; more or less conventional women with a subdued excitement in their manner at this very adventurous step they had taken; actresses, egotistic and unconcerned with adoring men in tow; men of all ages, kinds and conditions whose manner to me was always the same: a mixture of discretion and scarcely concealed desire.

All the women would subtly patronize me—the men would as subtly make love to me. . . . There would be a little music, a little meaningless conversation—a great deal to eat and drink. Vile! Vile!

I went through the day in a hideous humor. Poor Wong could not imagine what was the matter. Were the eggs too done? Had the broiler been scorched? Perhaps I was not well?

Harry came while I was dressing.

"I've a surprise for you to-night, darling," he said, leaning down and kissing my bare shoulder as I sat before the mirror pinning up my hair.

"I don't like surprises," I exclaimed petulantly, moving away from him.

The good humor did not leave his face.

"Oh, you'll like this one, I know."

How good he was to me, I thought, watching him in

the mirror. How honest, and even-tempered and *good* he was! I was the most ungrateful creature alive.

"I'm sure I'll like it," I cried, swiftly penitent, rising to throw my arms about his neck. "You're so good Harry, —so certain of yourself. I wish I were that way!"

But even as I spoke, I knew it was a lie. I would not give that aching disquiet within me for any security and goodness. That was my young soul's growing pains.

Wong was reassured at dinner. My bad humor had magically vanished. I was gay and irresponsible.

The change lasted into the evening. I recklessly faced down bad mannered old dowagers who looked at me as if I were a new and strange kind of animal. I baited the men until they fled in self-defense to less provocative quarters.

"Do you live quite alone?" an angular woman with an air of slumming asked me impertinently.

"Oh, yes, Mrs. Greyfield, I live quite alone—except, of course, when Harry comes. The solitude is wonderful and then the companionship is even more wonderful afterwards. You should try it. It is good for one's soul."

"Oh," she exclaimed indignantly as she dared in a voice of outraged respectability, "*oh!*"

I was still smiling amusedly at this little incident when Wong ushered a new couple into the room. Harry hurried up to receive them and brought them over to me. As I caught sight of the woman's face, the smile froze on my lips. The room had grown suddenly quiet, but I seemed to hear a noise of thundering waters in my brain.

The woman advancing towards me was Madeline Montrose.

At the time I was too astonished to observe clearly, or I would have noticed that she looked as astonished as I felt. Afterwards in recalling the incident, it flashed over me that the look in her face had been one of stark fear.

A cold exultation took possession of me. At last! At last! This was to be my hour.

I bowed to the beautiful woman and her insignificant escort who peered at me sharply and mumbled something in an undertone which I did not catch.

Harry was enjoying vastly the effect his "surprise" had produced. The whole room could talk of nothing but the uncanny resemblance between Miss Montrose and me, and every word of it only increased my desire for revenge.

It was much later before I found an opportunity to speak to Miss Montrose alone.

"I enjoyed your last picture but one so much," I told her.

She smiled graciously, but with a flicker of nervousness appearing in her famous eyes.

"I worked so hard to make 'The Gorgon's Head' just right," she said plaintively, "I'm glad you liked it."

"Oh, I don't mean 'The Gorgon's Head'," I protested smiling. "It was 'The Rose of Arcady' that I admired!"

Harry joined us before she could answer, and presently the little man who had come with her, trotted up. Frequent libations had loosened his tongue. He was jovially garrulous.

"You're the little girl that cost me such a great lot of

money last year," he said to me. "Now aren't you ashamed of yourself!"

"Hush, Ben," Miss Montrose commanded nervously.

"Hush? I will not," he refused. "This little girl cost me a great lot of money before I could get her out of the profession. Now aren't you glad I did, Miss May? You should be happier here with a swell apartment and a fine man like Harry than working yourself to death in a studio, *nicht?*"

I only smiled at Madeline Montrose.

"Oh, Ben," she ejaculated, helplessly furious.

"When did you pay to get me out of the profession, Mr. Arnheim?" I asked, enjoying Miss Montrose's discomfiture.

"When did I pay?" Mr. Arnheim repeated loudly and jocularly, "last July, a year ago, I signed a check made out to Bob Grimble, and it was a shameful big one at that."

"Then, Mr. Arnheim, I fear you've wasted a great lot of money," I laughed, "because I left the Unlimited almost a year before that check was signed."

Madeline Montrose's face showed a greenish tinge under its paint. Her fingers twisted and twisted a long necklace that she wore. I noticed that she kept moistening her lips feverishly.

"What—what's that you say," Mr. Arnheim stuttered. "You are surely mistaken—*lieber Gott*, so much money—*und warum?*"

The little man was in a pitiable state. *Warum*, he kept repeating in panicky, wrathful accents.

"*Ach*," he cried suddenly triumphant, "you are joking." He mopped his brow with a great silk handkerchief, a smile of relief struggled to the swart surface of his face. "The picture was not finished until July when I signed that check. They told me so. I know it!"

I could have embraced him! He was making it so easy for me. I raised my hands negligently and rearranged a hair pin. In this moment of suspense I tasted the sweetness of victory. I would soon be even with Madeline Montrose. She would soon be paid off in her own coin and with interest.

"Exactly," I said, not looking at her.

Mr. Arnheim darted a quick, suspicious glance at his star. Harry moved from one foot to the other. I was the only self-possessed person in the little group.

"But why," Mr. Arnheim demanded, "why, I ask you, should a company hold over a picture for a year before producing it, *if it was finished*, and if it *wasn't* . . .!"

I shrugged my shoulders indifferently, and looked away, leaving him to draw his own conclusions.

As I turned away from Mr. Arnheim's stare, my eye fell on a big, gold-framed mirror on the wall opposite. I started at my own reflection, gazed with horrified fascination at the expression on my face. It was base—mean! Where had I seen such a look before! And then I remembered the night DuVal and Lilla Bingham had found me in the music room at Marjorie's with Mint Collins. She had worn such a look! And it had frightened me, I remembered, because of its very baseness!

Ah, God, was I then no better than what I scorned!

Would I never reach the nobility of spirit for which I longed!

I turned back to Mr. Arnheim and managed a teasing laugh.

"Don't you know that I was just joking—taking my revenge on you for having got me out of the profession! You big business men *are* credulous to let a woman get the best of you so easily!"

Relief flowed into Madeline Montrose's set face. She laughed excitedly.

"You were a scream, Ben," she announced. "I couldn't say a word for just watching you. Wasn't he, Harry?"

Harry nodded gravely, his eyes never leaving me.

Mr. Arnheim smiled, a trifle uneasily.

"Well, you are some little joker, Miss May, and now after such a scare, I think Madeline had better take me home and get me over it!"

"Yes, we'd better go," Miss Montrose agreed eagerly. "Good-night, Miss May—good-night, Harry."

Smilingly supercilious, she gave me the tips of her white fingers and floated from the room with little Mr. Arnheim at her heels.

"You're splendid, Gretchen—splendid, girl," said Harry gravely. "If I'd suspected anything of the kind, I'd never have asked her to come, but I thought it would amuse you to see her."

"I wouldn't have missed it for anything," I told him sincerely.

Yes, I was base. But I had made a start. I had won a victory. All hate and resentment were washed clean

from me. If I thought of Madeline Montrose again, it would be with pity. She was welcome to her fame.

VII

HARRY'S mill interests kept him out of town a great part of the time, and this fact which had at first been my chief grievance, was now a blessing; for I wanted nothing so much as to be alone—to think—to get adjusted to myself, as it were.

Sometimes, I think that a just God created the business trip in order to give women a chance to find their souls.

If I talk a good deal of souls it is because at that time I thought a good deal about them. I do not quite know what I meant by the term—certainly not what my mother had meant in her long talks to me about salvation and so on. The soul, to me, was not something with which one was born, like heart and lungs and stomach, and which one guarded carefully here so that it might in the end enjoy a carefree life in Paradise. The soul was rather a thing which one assembled laboriously and in travail. It grew bit by bit out of one's joy and suffering. Discontent was the gauge by which one measured its progress. And its *raison d'être* was to be found in the here and now. To understand all things—to achieve tolerance without compromise or loss of vision—to love humanity—above all, to love oneself—to be deeply centered and rooted in self without which one can not hope to help others—last of all, to come to see more clearly—to point

the way ahead, even if it be but a step further on. . . . That was what I wanted a soul for.

At first when I felt my restlessness returning, I had cast about wildly for something to do. Pictures were out of the question—*that* was definitely over. But I must have something with which to occupy my time. I thought of the stage. There was an appeal in footlights and paint and applause!

I began haunting matinées and schools of acting. The pile of catalogs in my locked desk drawer increased daily.

Finally, I summoned courage to speak to Harry.

When I had finished somewhat breathlessly, he pursed his lips in a tuneless whistle.

"Why, Gretchen, dear, you don't know what you're asking," he said at last. "Do you know that you'd have to study a year or two—and then not be guaranteed a part. And, if you should succeed, you'd have rehearsals night and day, and after the show started you'd be away every evening until half-past eleven or twelve o'clock when you'd come back dead tired!"

"I never thought of that," I replied, staring back at him miserably. In fact, I had not considered Harry's side of the case at all. Of course, he wanted me in the evenings. That was why I was here!

"I love you too much to give you up, dearest," he went on. "And I don't believe you'd like the stage—it's a dog's life."

"Perhaps I shouldn't," I agreed flatly. The elation that had kept me going during the past weeks subsided.

A sense of my own futility rushed damningly over me again.

"You put that thought out of your head and run down town this afternoon and buy yourself something pretty!"

Harry sat down at my little ebony desk and wrote a check. It was for a thousand dollars.

"Now I've got to run," he said, handing it to me. "Get that mink coat you liked, or a new ring, or do any damned thing with it you want to! It's yours."

That was Harry's way. But I did not want a mink coat. I wanted something to do—something to get my teeth in and struggle with. And Harry could not understand that. My talk of souls and purposes made him uneasy.

At the first reference, he had stirred in his chair and suggested that we go to a show. Next time I knew he would tell me I was ill and advise a doctor, or a week-end at the seashore. The third time, I rather thought Harry would lose patience and leave me.

But I did not intend that even the second time should occur. My speculations about life, Harry regarded as symptoms of neurasthenia. That much I had seen on the one occasion when I had tried to confide in him. After that my inner life was a closed book to the man with whom I lived.

It was to little Wong that I turned. He seemed to have much that I sought. I took to watching him closely to surprise the secret of his calm. He was rooted in self if anyone ever was. And I suspected that Wong understood many things, too. Otherwise, how could he main-

tain the unshakable patience that was so great a part of him?

"Wong," I said suddenly at luncheon as he was bringing in the dessert, "Wong, don't you hate doing this sort of thing—cooking and cleaning and serving at table?"

He looked at me impassively, his yellow face an impenetrable secret.

"My father," he replied gravely at last, "rich tea merchant in Canton, yet he, too, serves, madame."

I felt reproached—and at the same time elated. I had wrung something from the Sphinx. To Serve! Surely, that was the key to life's meaning.

VIII

To Serve! But whom, or what?

I knew that no further help was to be had from Wong. It was his way to utter an occasional cryptic remark and leave it unexplained. Nor did I ever press him to be more explicit.

His reticences were a part of the mystery surrounding my servant, and so in love was I with the mystery that I never sought, except indirectly, to fathom his mental processes or to discover his antecedents.

Our first meeting had become symbolic of our relation. He was still a grave voice from the other side of a door, a slim yellow hand reached out to help me, but always with that barrier between. If I should become too importunate, I was sure the door would close—noiselessly, respectfully, but tight!

In the afternoon I went to my bedroom to think. But the place was too reminiscent of Harry. There were emotional overtones. The living room was better, but there the ghosts of parties lingered, besides, it was too *big*.

In despair, I wandered into the little alcove at one end of the room and pulled the green curtains together behind me. Here I found what I wanted—utter seclusion. I piled the pillows into a great nest on the broad window seat and lay flat on my back looking up at the June sky that was so like a lapis lazuli bowl Harry had given me.

I am afraid I did not think in the accepted sense at all. Rather, I felt intensely, all my life floated before me in little monochromes. I saw the child Gretchen in a stiffly starched, percale dress asking her omnipotent father for money to buy "Alice in Wonderland," I saw mother's thin, sallow face working with emotion as she plead with me to join the church and be saved. I saw Marion Fairley leaning very close as she whispered the story of how babies came. I saw Jake's blond head thrust comically over the thread cases behind which I sat sobbing over poor Tess. I saw Mr. Grimble's leer when he offered the astounding information about the pictured beauties on his office walls. I saw Alicia's upturned face, mutely questioning me. I saw Marjorie in her gleaming black dress moving among her guests with a smile on her lips and only God knew what anguish in her heart. . . .

Oh, there were many things that passed through my head. But there seemed to be no relation between them. They flitted in and out like restless moths.

Suddenly I sprang up from the window seat and left

the alcove. Wong was just entering the living room with a tea tray.

IX

THAT afternoon's was the first of many meditations at the windows. And, gradually, out of the chaos one thought emerged clear and definite.

I wanted to serve women.

How, I did not know.

I spent long mornings in the department stores questioning shopgirls whenever an opportunity occurred. I talked with scrubwomen and beggars and the guests at Harry's parties.

Those lowest in the social scale were most unreserved. The stories they poured so eagerly into my ears, those derelicts and drudges! Stories of tyranny and brutality and lust—of drunkenness and greed. . . . And always there was a man who was to blame for their wretchedness.

My increasing love for women began to express itself in a corresponding hatred of men.

I burned to avenge those unfortunate ones to whom life had been more unkind than to me.

And still I hesitated, because I did not know how to begin.

One Saturday afternoon in late September as I was hurrying home from a solitary drive that had taken me into all sorts of out-of-the-way corners of New York, I was halted at Fifth Avenue until a parade could pass.

It was a parade of women.

Curious, I left my automobile and pressed forward through gaps in the crowd until I reached the curb.

Down the Avenue marched the long line of white-clad women. There were floats and bands and banners, but most impressive to me was the look on their proudly raised faces. Hope was there and indomitable courage, and defiance and vision.

The ribald grins of the bystanders and their occasional jeering remarks were sacrilege. This was a religious rite. I was completely lifted out of myself by a rush of emotion. I wanted to join the marching women and follow them wherever they might lead.

Now I knew how I could serve. Or, I thought I knew, though even then I was conscious of a doubt that this would prove to be the solution of my problem.

Now, of course, I know the reason for my misgiving, and I know that it was warranted. But at the time it was nothing more definite than the vague stirrings of an instinct.

X

ON Monday morning I ordered my car from the garage and drove to the headquarters of what I regarded as the principal suffrage organization in the city.

Two women sat working in the big office which I entered. Their desks were separated by a low railing from the rest of the room that contained a few chairs, a long table littered with pamphlets and leaflets, and shelves on which were piled other suffrage literature. The walls were

decorated with signed photographs of prominent supporters of the movement, and brightly colored posters.

One of these caught my eye as I entered. "Votes for Women" it insisted in black letters half a foot high.

Why just votes, I wondered idly. Women needed so many things. And after having witnessed that parade, I was sure they had only to demand what they wanted, and it would come inevitably. Still, there must be a beginning made—one thing at a time. I must curb my impatience.

I explained my errand to one of the women who had come forward.

She surveyed me from head to foot.

"I'll take you in to the Secretary," she said at last, evidently impressed by my Hickson gown and sable neckpiece.

The Secretary was a middle-aged spectacled woman whose keen grey eyes surveyed me much as the clerk's in the outer office had done.

"You want to help," she said in a quick, authoritative voice. "We are very much in need of supporters, Miss May. The expenses of the campaign are considerable, and there is, of course, a great deal to be done. . . ."

"Oh, I'll give every penny I own," I interrupted eagerly, "but what I most want is to do something—to have the feeling of being a part of it. It is such a tremendously big and important work, Mrs. Daggett!"

Mrs. Daggett's somewhat grim face relaxed in an approving smile.

"That is the spirit we are finding everywhere," she

informed me, "and it is that which makes our victory assured—for we are going to win, we must win!"

"We must win," I echoed fervently.

"I think we can use you, Miss May," she said after a pause. "In fact, I am sure we can. But I must see where you will fit in best. Have you had any experience in organization work, or publicity, or speaking, or anything of the kind?"

"No," I admitted humbly, "but I am sure I could learn. . . ."

"Come in tomorrow afternoon," she said, "and I'll assign some work to you."

There was a brief exchange of formalities, and then I was floating down the long hallway to the elevator, so happy that my feet seemed not to be touching the solid earth at all.

On the street someone called my name excitedly.

I came out of my abstraction to find Mint Collins beaming down at me.

XI

"Good heavens, Gretchen," he greeted me, "you look like you've found the philosopher's stone! I had to speak to you three times before you even heard me. How do you do it?"

"Perhaps I have," I rejoined, "or something almost as good. How are you, Mint?"

"Best in the world. How are you?"

"Fine—I've left DuVal, you know."

Mint's face grew very grave.

"I know," he said regretfully.

"You've seen him then?"

He hesitated a moment while he seemed to be making up his mind about something.

"DuVal looked me up on the coast last winter," he said finally. "He told me then about the divorce."

"The divorce," I exclaimed.

"What are you doing?" Mint asked. "I'm to meet a chap at the Algonquin at one. Can't you have lunch with us? I'd like to have a talk with you, and I'm leaving town this afternoon."

"Yes—I can."

I let Mint call a taxi, though my own car was within a few blocks distance. He might suspect how I was living, but he should not have proof positive, if I could help it.

"You're looking splendidly, Gretchen. It's good to see you again. What are you doing with yourself?"

"I'm going in for suffrage, Mint . . . but let's don't talk about me. Tell me what DuVal had to say?"

"Not much. DuVal's as proud as Lucifer, you know. He simply told me that you had left him—that he didn't know where you were, had never tried to find out, in fact. And that he'd been in Reno getting a divorce. I was surprised that he'd care to see me again. We were not on very good terms when I left, you remember."

"He always cared more for you than for me."

"Nonsense," Mint laughed. "He was mad about you, Gretchen. Is still, I suspect. He didn't look very happy with his freedom."

"Then he got the divorce without any difficulty?"

"Oh, yes," said Mint.

"Tell me," I begged, "have you seen Marjorie?"

He shook his head gloomily.

"DuVal gave me the news. She's adopted a baby. A Baby—! I don't want to see her in her new rôle. . . . She probably wouldn't let me come anyway."

"This chap who's lunching with me," Mint explained as we entered the hotel, "is from California—an artist. He came on as I did and is going to be here for a couple of months. Awfully fine boy. If you have time, and he doesn't bore you, I hope you'll show him around a bit. He's never been to New York before."

I had never known an artist. At Mint's words, I pictured a pale, slim and nervous youth who perhaps wore flowing ties. My heart sank at the prospect of god-mothering such a person for even two months. But I was very fond of Mint.

"I'll be glad to show him around," I said, "if he isn't bored by me."

"Good girl! You won't bore him. You're much too paintable for that, aside from your innate inability to bore anyone. By the way, what do you call yourself now, Gretchen?"

"Gretchen May—I couldn't very well go on being Mrs. Archer, after—after I went away."

A tawny-eyed, black-haired tornado descended upon us.

"It's great—simply great, Mint," the man cried. "I haven't stopped a minute. I've been down in Bleeker Street sketching. Have you ever been to the movie theater there? They showed 'The Old Nest' this morning

and the audience wept! Yes! Can you imagine a metropolitan audience sobbing over the wandering boy? They do there. And the photographers' shops where they display tinted and enlarged pictures of girls in their confirmation dresses—and those enchanting bakeries and——”

“Hear, hear,” Mint interrupted laughingly. “Miss May, may I present Mr. Cameron?”

“Are you with him? I never heard of such luck. Are you going to have lunch with us? I'm starved.”

“We've only been waiting for you, young animal,” Mint informed our dazzling companion.

“Yesterday I stayed down on the Bowery (is that right?) for hours,” Mr. Cameron ran on. “Have you ever been in the barber shops, Miss May, where they have the Black Eyes Made Natural signs in the windows—or have you bought pink suspenders and peanut brittle from a push cart—or dined in a Yiddish restaurant where they assassinate you if you inadvertently order ham and eggs—or visited the little brass places on . . . What street is it, Mint?”

“You've got me there,” Mint admitted good-naturedly. “He's been in New York a week, Gretchen, and he already knows it better than I do.”

“I'm glad your name is Gretchen. Have you ever seen such hair, Mint? May I paint you sometime?”

“Maybe,” I smiled.

“I've a studio in a funny brick house that has a tree growing through the roof or the fire-escape or something. . . . You should see it. Or perhaps you don't like that

sort of thing—? Mint doesn't, but then, Mint is hopelessly conservative and respectable. Are you, too?"

"Neither," I denied.

"Neither am I," he said happily. "Please don't mind if I talk you to death. I'm not always so—ebullient, but then, I haven't always been in this New York!"

"I understand," I told him, "because I love it, too."

"You do? Then will you explore with me? Mint's leaving this afternoon. He's no good anyway, but I don't know anyone else so I cling to him from sheer desperation!"

"If you don't quit raving like a boarding school girl, Gretchen will repent of her promise to show you around," Mint threatened with mock seriousness.

"Has she promised? Mint, you are good for something! I apologize for my recent remarks about you. You have rare gleams of imagination in spite of your inability to find romance in places other than the Stock Exchange! Now I'll hush and talk sensibly for a while."

It was impossible for him to do either.

During luncheon he kept both of us in gales of laughter with his whimsical nonsense. But it was to me that he addressed himself chiefly.

Mint looked on with a teasing light in his eyes as if he understood very well the trend of things.

But I am sure Mint did not guess that Roger Cameron in half an hour had spoken to my heart in a way that no other man had ever done.

I have always known my own kind instinctively. There is no way of explaining why one is attracted to one person

and repelled by another. It is not reasoned or logical—it just is.

So now, looking into the yellow eyes of this Cameron and listening to his talk, I felt that he was the man with whom I might have been supremely happy. Before we had left the hotel I knew that, unless I was careful, I should fall in love with Mint's artist.

"We'll see you to the station, won't we?" Roger Cameron said, turning to me on the last words.

I hesitated.

"Oh, come on, please," he urged. "Mint is going away and we may never see him again. And, if you don't, I may never find my way out of that awful labyrinth. Think of it! I might get lost and wander for days—months—years, without seeing the sun again. There wouldn't even be the traditional roots and berries of lost children for me to subsist on. Please save me from an awful fate!"

I went.

Mint's train did not leave for half an hour. A few minutes before it was due, Roger Cameron tore away from us on some pretext and went dashing from the waiting room as if pursued by furies.

Mint looked after him affectionately.

"Roger's susceptible as the deuce, Gretchen," he told me, "and I can see that he's already more than half in love with you—don't be too unkind to him."

"I've been too unhappy to be unkind to anyone, if I know it," I replied.

"Don't be too kind, either," Mint added. "That's sometimes the unkindest thing one can do."

His lips tightened and I knew he was thinking of Marjorie.

"Are you all right, Gretchen?" he asked. "I mean, do you—forgive me—but have you enough money? I'd hate to have you worried or anything and I feel like an old enough friend to be impertinent."

"Yes, I'm quite all right, Mint," I said, braving the searching glance he gave me.

"Please let me know if you ever need any help, of any kind. . . ."

Roger Cameron hurried up, carrying an enormous tissue-wrapped bundle.

"Chrysanthemums for you, Mint! I forgot to write a train letter. . . . Will these do instead?" he asked, holding out the bowers.

Mint shook his head sternly.

"I'll accept nothing in place of the train letter. So suppose we turn these over to Gretchen?"

Roger Cameron seized Mint's hand.

"Oh, but you *have* imagination," he cried.

"And now," he said to me when we were leaving the station, "why can't you have dinner with me tonight? Mint's gone and . . ."

He looked at me pleadingly.

Harry was out of town and would not be back until next day. Why shouldn't I have dinner with Roger Cameron?

"I'll have to go home first," I said, thinking of my stranded automobile, "but I'll meet you at six-thirty."

"I'll come for you," he cried, delighted.

"I'd better meet you at the restaurant," I evaded him.

"It will be better that way."

"Then you come to my studio and I'll show you the abnormal tree, and afterwards we will go to an Italian place beyond reproach, and where the proprietor looks a medieval brigand!"

XII

THE next afternoon when I entered Mrs. Daggett's office at the suffrage headquarters, I at once became aware of a marked change in her manner.

The cold grey eyes peered at me even more sharply than on the day before. There was no relaxing of the grim face.

Inexplicably troubled by her lack of cordiality, I could find nothing to say beyond my eager "good afternoon." I stood in front of the desk, nervously waiting for her to speak.

"Ah, Miss May," Mrs. Daggett began in a singularly colorless voice, "there's been a tie-up in the work—I'm afraid there's no use of our taking on more helpers just now."

"But—but," I stammered, trying to conceal my disappointment. "How long do you think it will be before. . . .?"

"It is impossible to tell," she returned, "and under the circumstances. . . ."

"I'm sorry," I said slowly, "because I very much wanted a chance to help. What has caused the tie-up, do you think?"

Mrs. Daggett looked just a shade embarrassed.

"It is hard to say," she murmured evasively. "We thank you for your interest, Miss May, and are very sorry that we can not avail ourselves of your offer to coöperate."

Her regrets had a ring of finality.

Without a word, I turned and left the office.

Shame and rage almost overpowered me. I was a pariah, but who was that self-satisfied mummy to judge me?

Mrs. Daggett's attitude of passive resistance convinced me that there had been no "tie-up"—that it was myself they objected to.

A morbid fancy took possession of me. I, too, wore the scarlet letter, but branded—on my forehead—invisible to myself, yet proclaiming me to everyone with whom I came in contact.

The idea persisted with such strength that it became an obsession. As I reached the street, I pulled my hat far down over my eyes and hurried back to my apartment as if I had been a criminal.

But, no. That could not be. Mrs. Daggett had been eager enough to have me at our first interview. Since then, she had found out about me from someone—in some way.

I crept into the alcove and pulled the hangings together behind me. Here, at least, was sanctuary.

On the walls of that office I had seen a signed photograph of a well-known actress who had been to some of Harry's parties. It was an open secret that she had at least one lover. Why was she welcomed, and I shut out?

It was cruel—unjust, I was no worse than she, I protested passionately to the waving red tree-tops outside my windows. But they waved rhythmically on, heedless of my misery. Slow clouds moved majestically across the blue sky. The river's quiet progress seemed to counsel calm!

Bit by bit the tumult ebbed out of my heart, but not the soreness.

"Nature cares nothing for morals," something spoke within me. "Nature cares only for expediency—results. And underneath all their superficial regard for morality, human beings are much like nature. No one is really concerned about the number of lovers a woman has, so long as she makes her own way. That is why Anice Thompson's private life is condoned, while yours is not. Your lover is your living—hers is an indulgence. If you were a successful actress or writer or artist or business woman, the world would forgive you your Harrys, provided you exercised a reasonable amount of good taste and discretion. If a man is to support you, then you must observe the rules of the game or be counted out. And it is not men who are the first to condemn you. It is women. You've cheated—you've turned traitor to the cause—you're a scab! Not morality, but economics is the determining factor, Gretchen. . . . No use to rail. It is life."

"Then life is very hard," I cried.

There was no answer.

XIII

HARRY was coming for dinner.

I scrubbed my face with soap. I rubbed a fragrant cream into its skin. I dusted it with soft white powder.

There was no sign of a scarlet letter on my brow, but I seemed to feel it burning there—burning deep and red and ineradicable.

I bound my hair in thick, flat strands round and round my head, low on my forehead.

"Tell me, Harry," I asked feverishly when he came, "do you think people in the streets can look at me and tell that I'm a bad woman?"

"Ye Gods, what a question," he roared. "Yes, darling, the cloven hoof is visible to everyone, you exhale a faint, but unmistakable odor of brimstone, and even the tallest hats are not high enough to quite conceal your horns!"

I burst into tears.

"Gretchen—tell me who's been saying things to you," he cried angrily, gathering me into his arms as if I had been a child.

Between sobs I told him the story of my experience with Mrs. Daggett.

"Damned old cat," Harry exploded when I had finished.

"Someone's told her about me, I know they have," I wept.

"Eliza Greyfield's a bug on suffrage—she's some sort of officer or something," he said reflectively, after a time, "but I hate to think that she'd. . . ."

"That skinny, nosing woman who was here the night Miss Montrose came," I cried. "It's her work, Harry. I'd stake my soul on it. Oh, how can people be so cruel! How can they? I've never done anything to hurt her."

"Now don't you think about it any more," Harry begged with his characteristic desire to have everyone happy. "We can get around Mrs. Greyfield in more ways than one, dear. . . ."

"There's no use now," I said dispiritedly, "the damage has been done."

"Well, we can at least fix it so that no more old hens can talk about you," he insisted.

"How?"

"How? Simplest thing in the world! We can get married."

I looked at Harry incredulously. Somehow, the thought of marrying him had never entered my mind.

"You've been mighty sweet to me, Gretchen," he went on. "For over two years I've been happier with you than I ever was before in my life. I love you, and there's no one else I care two cents about. I'm getting old, too—forty-three next birthday—and I've got to the point where I'm thinking of children. I'd like us to be married and have children, Gretchen," he ended, a little abashed, a little wistful.

I realized that I was confronted with the necessity for

making what was perhaps the most important decision in my life.

XIV

My husband had not wanted children and now my lover was asking me to marry him so that we could have children! Why couldn't things be more logically arranged? Everything in the world was topsy-turvy, everyone was at cross purposes.

I was almost twenty-five years old. It is the age when women begin to realize that their allotted time is nearly over, that their stock in trade is decreasing in value every day. At father's store the organdies and voiles had been reduced in July from a dollar to seventy-five cents. I felt much like a bolt of summer fabric with fall coming on. Did I want to be reduced? Marriage with Harry would be a safe removal from the shelves. I would have found a purchaser before I had become shopworn and out of season.

Children—I had never thought very seriously about them. There had never been a need for me to decide whether I wanted them or not until now. I rather thought I did not. They invaded one's individuality so ruthlessly. They clung so close. They were sops to make one forget. The forgetting might be sweet, but it was forgetting none the less. Then, had I the right? I on whose brow that flaming letter burned. I who was a pariah—a run-away wife—a man's mistress. I who was compounded of Herman and Agatha May and a third element which was neither, but perhaps more damning than both. Did I

want children to partake of my shame and that doubtful inheritance?

There was yet another factor, so intangible, yet, so powerful. If Harry had asked me to marry him two days before, I think I should have agreed. If I had left Mrs. Daggett's office three minutes earlier or later, I should never have met Mint Collins, nor felt the disturbing influence of Roger Cameron. I was not in love with him—yet. But the vision of love which I had been granted so far exceeded anything I had ever known that it made substitutes, however advantageous from a worldly point of view, impossible.

XV

HARRY was looking at me expectantly.

"I'm sorry—and unutterably grateful," I told him, "but I can't—I really can't—marry you, Harry."

"Oh, Gretchen," he exclaimed, "why won't you? You can get a divorce."

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him that I was divorced but I hesitated. What was the use? It would only make explanations harder.

"I can't dear. It wouldn't be right—I can't," was my only reply.

"Is it because of the way your husband acted," he asked. "I'm not that sort, you ought to know it, dear."

"No, it isn't that, Harry. It's—it's—just impossible!"

"Would it be worse than having the Greyfields always armed against you," he asked gently.

"Let them say what they like," I cried in desperation.

"I can't help it. I do what I must. But I will be myself in spite of everything!"

XVI

ROGER CAMERON and I visited many strange places in New York and many familiar places which took on a new and picturesque significance under the spell of his unabated wonder at life and all things in the world.

We ate chow-mein and ethereal rice cakes under the swinging lanterns in Chinatown. We reinhabited the stately old mansions on the outskirts of the Battery with gallant, swashing men and lovely ladies. He painted my portrait in the studio under the abnormal tree. We drank execrable coffee in Fourth Street Bohemian restaurants at fifty cents the cup. We spent an evening on the Merry-go-rounds and Scenic Railroads at Coney Island, where Roger insisted on having our photographs taken in an accommodating shop where one could pose in an automobile, airplane, or rowboat without extra charge. We dined in Turkish restaurants with Armenian names where the fat patrons infuriated Roger by staring persistently at me out of their sleepy eyes.

He bought me violets from the flower vendors and presented them with Spanish verses, the words of which I did not understand—but Roger's tone would have been intelligible in Patagonian.

We rode up Fifth Avenue in a hansom cab.

We made an excursion to the Bronx Zoo and stayed in the cat houses for hours. There was some affinity be-

tween my tawny-eyed companion and the great beasts. He never tired of them. I liked the cubs.

We—oh, we did a great many things. But Roger never came to my apartment. He knew, of course, my telephone number, but I had never given him my address. When he begged to be allowed to come to see me, I always put him off with the excuse that I had no place to receive callers.

Subterfuge was very easy. He had the unquestioning acceptance of a child. I do not think he ever wondered how I lived. If he did, I suppose he explained things by an inheritance from some parent or aunt.

I sometimes think that the cruellest thing I ever did was the deception I practiced on Roger.

But I so wanted my hour out of life. I had never really played. There was Jake, but then I had no time to be joyous and carefree as I was now. The drudgery at home and in the store drained me so dry that there was little spirit left for gaiety.

After Mrs. Daggett's rebuff, my sensitiveness did not permit me to try to find something to do. What could I do? True, I could have left Harry and worked in a store or an office, but then my sacrifices would all have been in vain. I should be back at the beginning again. And I had not the courage to try. Someone might know me or know someone who did. I was beautiful, and my beauty was of an unusual type. I have never passed unnoticed.

Perhaps I might have faced these considerations, but for another: I had grown soft. My life, first with DuVal

and then with Harry, had undoubtedly developed me in many ways. But luxury had got in its insidious work. Go back to a hall bedroom and a dairy lunch existence? I could not. Nor do I think many people in my position would have acted differently. If I had had any conviction of sinfulness in my present life—but I had none really. The world said I was shameful. At times, in moments of depression, I agreed with the world, but at heart I felt no qualms about my mode of life. I did not expect to burn eternally because I had left DuVal and come to Harry. Nor did I believe that I could be saved by returning to a life that irked my spirit intolerably and broke my body.

The whole matter was social—economic—and that would not be bettered by reformation on my part.

My salvation, if there was to be salvation, would be wrung out of my own soul in bloody sweat. I could save myself, not by facing about in accordance with the world's ideas, but by facing myself, knowing myself, and then, doing what I must.

But that could come later. *Now* was for Roger.

Harry was out of town for days at a time. When he was in town, he never came to my apartment before dinner.

Harry had changed a little since his proposal. He was gentler with me—generous as always, but preoccupied, less ardent. I suppose he was thinking of children.

I told myself that I was doing Harry no injustice in seeing Roger. There was never so much as a kiss between us. Roger would not marry me, if he knew the truth.

And, feeling as I did, I would not have permitted any other relationship.

I only wanted to see him, to be with him, to let myself pretend for a while that I was eighteen and he my first love, and that life was still a closed book with a blue and gold cover.

It was senseless, and perhaps unkind, but I do not regret it.

Roger would forget. Life to him was still an engrossing, and heroic romance.

Perhaps the hardest thing I had to face during the three months of his stay was the fact that he would forget, and that he could never understand.

A painted woman on a street corner had looked at him from under her big lace hat one night when we were together.

Roger had shuddered, ever so slightly.

"That," he said, "is the most terrible crime of all. Murder and robbery I can understand, but not how people can sell love for money."

It seemed as if an icy hand had been laid on my heart. I did not answer him, nor could I enter into his hilarious mood during the rest of the evening.

What would he think of me!

XVII

"I'm going home next week," Roger said suddenly one afternoon. We were having tea at the Brevoort.

For an instant I heard the playing of the orchestra

very distinctly. A woman at the next table laughed. Motors rushed by outside. People chattered. I was quite numb and yet my senses registered the minutest impressions. It was strange.

He reached across the table and laid his hand in mine.

"Do you care so much, Gretchen?" he asked wonderingly.

"I shall miss you frightfully," I admitted, trying to make the tone sound commonplace.

"My orange groves and blue sky will not be denied any longer," he said. "I've already stayed a month more than I intended. . . . My house, Gretchen, is white with crimson roses clambering over it. There is a patio with a little fountain in the center—and upstairs a big, glass-roofed studio where I work. . . . It is warm out there, always, and the nights are very long and very fragrant. Everything is bigger, more luxuriant, than here—even the stars are huge and burning, not like eastern stars—and geraniums grow miles into the air so that their tops are sometimes hidden by the clouds. . . . Would you like that, Gretchen?"

"It sounds most—attractive," I murmured feebly. "But now I must go home."

"Let me come with you, Gretchen, please. You've never let me come to your home. I'm sure that even a hall bedroom that you lived in would be charming—please!"

"I can't," I cried nervously. "It would spoil everything."

"Silly," he scoffed. "I'm coming anyway—not this afternoon, but tonight after dinner. I want to see you."

"You can't," I cried. "Besides, you don't know where I live!"

"Oh, don't I! Much you know about it. I've known ever since this morning!"

"How," I began, panic-stricken.

"I looked through the telephone book," Roger answered my unspoken question. "Oh, Gretchen, it took so long—each one of the six million in this town has three telephones! I've been a week finding out. And now I won't be put off any longer. You can expect me at *The Alhambra Apartments* at eight-thirty!"

"I shan't be there—I'm going away at six o'clock."

"You're afraid," he teased me, "you're running away!"

"No. I'm not. Please don't come, Roger," I pleaded.

"But if you're not going to be there, why should you care?"

"I shan't be there—you'll only be wasting your time."

"That's nothing. I'm coming!"

Through my brain like a dirge ran the two words: The end.

Why not let him come? Let him find out. It was the only way—and it was inevitable. Perhaps it was the easier way, easier than telling him—easier for both of us.

XVIII

THERE was a long peal at the bell.

I drew the covers about me, stuffed the bedspread into my mouth to stifle the agonized scream that it seemed must come.

Ah, this was hard—harder than death. It was life.

I heard Wong tonelessly repeating my instruction.

“Miss May is out, but Mr. Baldwin will be in in a few moments. Would you care to wait?”

The short silence was more expressive than any words.

The door to the living room closed softly. There was a sound of stumbling footsteps going down the hall.

Then all was quiet.

WHEREFORE

I

Two years have passed since that night. Two years that might have been a day so far as any change in my life is concerned.

Spring follows Winter and is succeeded by Summer and Autumn—that much I can tell by the trees. But I have no seasons.

After that night I was ill, for the first time in my life. For weeks I lay in the big bedroom not caring what happened. At first there were whole days when I tossed stormily about and babbled deliriously of Jake and Marjorie and Roger—especially of Roger. The trained nurse told me that. Then it was only Wong who could quiet me by talking in a low, sing-song voice—in Chinese.

I wonder if I knew what he said. Sometimes it seems to me that we held long conversations in which I asked eternally, and he answered. We were very close. He gave me his secret.

But I can not be sure.

However, when the long period of coma had passed and I could once more resume my life in the alcove, I sent for books on Oriental philosophy and religion and found that I already knew much of what I read. The books held chiefly two words for me—two words that seemed to have

been blended in Wong's long, soothing discourses by my bedside—Karma and Nirvana, and the greatest of these was Nirvana.

They were very kind to me. Harry would sit for hours by my bed, looking at me with anxious, devoted eyes. The white shadow of the nurse hurried in and out of the darkness surrounding me. Wong was the light.

Since then, life has gone on much as before—on the surface. Harry comes and goes. Wong is again the reserved, solicitous servant. We still give parties, though less often.

In the two years my existence has been a grey thread, without a knot, without a single colored interval.

The war has come and gone like a brief nightmare that left me untouched.

The suffrage fight has been won to an accompaniment of jubilation that seems a little strange to me with my larger vision of freedom. Still, it is a beginning. I have learned patience and humility in these two years.

I seldom go out.

Why should I go to the theater when I have the changing drama of the river and the hills to absorb me? Why should I take a drive when, without moving from the window seat, my spirit can roam at will on a saffron colored cloud or the quick wind? Why should I talk with people when there is always the murmuring of the trees for me to hear?

Still, I have not quite attained my longed-for goal. Still there remains the futile wish that someone will under-

stand. That is why I have gone on writing. My journal is for Marjorie. She will know.

It has seemed to me that there is a hushed regard encompassing me—as if I were very ill. I can not break through the quiet. It is relentless and expectant. I am a pale, intruding shadow in the alive world—and yet, I sometimes feel that the shadow is more real than the actualities.

Harry asked me again to marry him, but as if he knew what my answer would be. I refused, but gently—Harry is so good. I am sure he wants children, and I am sure that he will never leave me and marry another woman.

How strange it is that whosever life I touched, I have marred! I have a deep sense of my having been marred at the outset. Perhaps that is why.

After Roger went, I remembered how Marjorie's religion had consoled her. For a long time my mind has longed to yield. I have visited cathedrals and listened to the droning of many masses. I have prayed. I have thought with yearning of a convent cell. But there is a part of me that will not assent to this escape.

For all my life has been a series of escapes. And each time I have eluded one problem to meet another and a greater one. Now I have a longing to face one problem squarely.

The sun is sinking in a crimson blaze. How many sun-downs have I watched, hopefully—despairingly—apathetically—from my windows! But never one quite like this one. It is a glorious finale to the day. It is a flourish of trumpets to the new king, Night.

It is the West, ushering out the old with dignity—ushering in the new with hope. The old is dead. . . . The new will also die.

Redder than a cardinal's cap, redder than the blood of martyrs, the sun goes down.

II

LAST night I dreamed a dream.

On the summit of a high, barren mountain there sat a veiled and shrouded figure with bowed head. And the feet of the figure were bound and its hands were shackled. At the foot of the mountain were thousands of women, seen like shadows through the thick fog—women toiling at looms, women hoeing in fields, women bent over typewriters, women nursing the sick, women in childbirth, starving women in villages devastated by war, women watching their dead. And from the mouths of these countless women there issued a faint wailing that gathered volume as it ascended—such a sound as is made by the sea or the wind—monotonous, changeless, persistent.

As the noise of the wailing reached the shrouded figure, it seemed to weep.

Then it rose and began struggling to loosen its shackles, threshing about so mightily that the whole mountain trembled and even the earth below. And as it struggled, it gave vent to loud, furious cries which were heard in the valley beneath.

And for a moment the women ceased their wailing and looked nervously at one another.

Still the shrouded figure wrestled with its bonds. And, after a time, its hands came free. Bending swiftly, it untied the cords about its ankles, unwound the shroud and veil and, casting them scornfully aside, emerged a woman.

The woman was slender and strongly made and the shining splendor of her nude body blinded the eyes.

In her right hand, she clasped a star; and in her left, the crescent moon. On her forehead was a chaplet of orioles. At her feet, flowed seven great rivers.

She smiled, and the fog in the valley began to fade.

Then the woman spoke, and at the sound of her voice the great looms ceased their whirring, the typewriters and the hoes became idle and the cries of travail hushed themselves, while all the women gazed upwards at the figure on the mountain.

"Oh, women everywhere, my sisters," cried the voice, "in factory, schoolroom, field, or office, or kitchen, hear my message to you and know that your salvation lies in yourselves. Tear aside the fogs of prejudice and class distinctions—abandon your jealousies—your pettiness—your cruelty to one another. Become conscious! Train your daughters to be women first and wives afterward. It is through work that women will ascend to their predestined place. Until each girl child is taught that she must work constructively to earn a right to live—until she learns that her work is more important than anything else—just so long will women toil at meaningless tasks, so long will they suffer needlessly, so long will they be oppressed. Glorious creators, womb of gods and

men, come out of your bondage! Be conscious of your destiny—and work!”

When she began, a gleam of hope had flickered in the blank or tortured faces upraised to her. When she had finished, there was silence for a short while, and then the women laughed mockingly and resumed their drudgery, their childbearing, their mourning for the dead.

Their laughter was sadder than their wailing.

As its last jeering echoes faded, a creature came running across the mountain. Its body was like that of an alligator, its head was the head of a jackal, but it had human hands.

The creature seized the bright woman, bound her wrists and ankles and replaced the veil and the shroud. Then it, too, laughed and ran away.

The seven great rivers vanished. Again, fog obscured the valley and the women.

The bowed figure sat sorrowing on the barren mountain top.

When I awoke I was frightened, because I did not understand the dream. But I was very sad.

III

THE mist floats beneath my windows in golden, sun-touched waves, hiding the tree-tops.

It is very early.

I raise the windows and the alcove is invaded by slender

wraiths that touch me with cool fingers, cling and disappear.

A strange exaltation possesses me. For I have not yielded.

I have done much that was wrong, much that was cowardly, but I have been relentlessly myself through everything. I have not grovelled before God. I have not begged for mercy.

The last great temptation is over. The lure of incense and a nun's cell and prayer has departed.

Women will come after me to whom may be granted life and victory, but to me, their sister, who was born too soon, there can be nothing but escape. And out of many escapes, I choose the only final one.

I choose the open, rather than the closed window.

"To plunge into moonlit water as the most romantic way. . . ." Ah, but mist gilded with the young morning sun is better even than that!

Now Harry can marry and have children. Now Wong can live in Canton in as great state as his tea merchant father. Wong is to have my money. I like to think of the little man in silk-embroidered jackets. I like to think that he will remember me. Now my soul will return to the source—the drop to the ocean.

There is good in everything. Everything has a meaning. I would not change a single incident in my life. They have all been straw, sometimes good, sometimes bad straw, of which I have made brick.

Now! The West on which my windows face is a sunlit

sea of mist; and towards that I go on the pathway of the dawn.

Somewhere I think that I shall smile at little Wong's consternation when he parts the green hangings. Again I shall have left the alcove before he could summon me.

THE END

